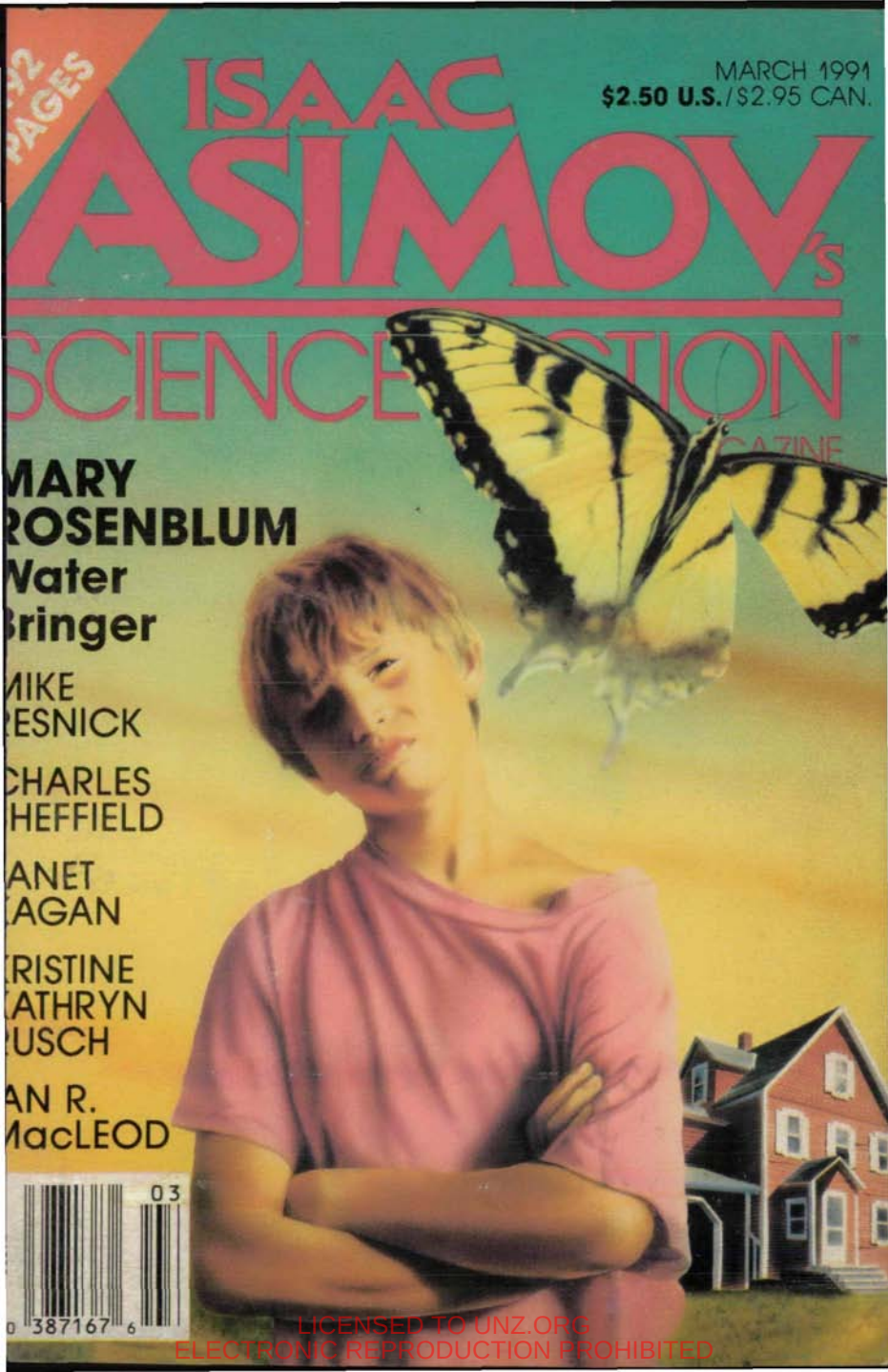
MARCH 1991
$2.50 U.S./$2.95 CAN.

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE



MARY ROSENBLUM
Water Bringer

MIKE RESNICK

CHARLES SHEFFIELD

JANET KAGAN

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

IAN R. MacLEOD

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED.

Announcing a better way to learn how to...

Write for

IF YOU WANT TO WRITE LIKE A real professional, begin at the beginning. Start with the basic building blocks used by successful writers – no matter what their specialties may be – and once you master these basics, you can write for any market that interests you.

You've already seen enough, known enough people, experienced enough relationships and accumulated enough facts, special knowledge and wisdom to fill a five-foot shelf.

But what you may not have in equal depth is the professional training and techniques you need to get it all down on paper and put it across to the editors and publishers who decide what will appear in print.

Where does a beginner turn for help?

Most aspiring writers "go it alone" – not because they prefer to struggle in isolation, but because they don't know where to turn for help, or because the only help available is in a seminar, classroom, or lecture hall. They need personal, individual attention – not stiff competition from their classmates for the few minutes an instructor has available for questions. There *had* to be a better way to learn!

The challenge was taken up by a group of writers and editors whose inspired coaching over the last 20 years has produced hundreds of published writers. The program they developed, *Breaking into Print*,™ combines two basic forms of creative writing: articles and short stories. Virtually every piece of writing in the English language that you admire was created with these same basic building blocks.

Your coach works with you one-on-one

To be a good writer, you need a winning coach. If you qualify for *Breaking into Print,* your coach will be a pro – a widely published author of short stories, books and articles or an experienced editor. His one-on-one coaching will help you develop your strengths, overcome your weaknesses, and guide you through the tough spots.

The cornerstone of the program is its one-on-one method of teaching: each student has a personal writing coach and they work together as a team.

You progress at your own pace, on your schedule. Your personal writing coach fits his schedule to yours: he's always there, ready to work when you are.

These master writers and editors know how to teach and how to coach aspiring writers to bring their writing up to publication standards. They also know that getting published demands accurate knowledge of specific markets – as well as solid writing tailored to current editorial requirements.

We help you to find your own writing niche

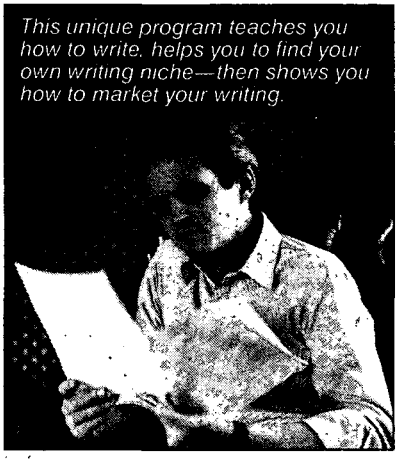
For these reasons, *Breaking into Print* not only teaches you how to write articles and short stories – it also guides you to your strongest form of writing, the writing niche that's best for *you.*

But it doesn't end there. Your coach will stick with you after you find your niche and show you how to market your finished work to that segment of the market. You're a team: he's a winning coach training you to become a winning writer.

This one-on-one teaming of a beginner with a skillful mentor offers you a quality and intensity of training in writing and in *market-*

LICENSED TO UNCLE
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Publication!


This unique program teaches you how to write, helps you to find your own writing niche—then shows you how to market your writing.

ing your writing that we have not found in any school, college or university anywhere!

You must qualify for the team

But first you must qualify for the team. You must demonstrate the necessary potential and the capacity to accept constructive criticism from your coach, learn from it, and turn it into a winning performance. If you have the aptitude and the maturity to qualify, and if you decide to enroll, you'll get our commitment in writing:

Your personal coach will teach you how to—

1. *Write articles and short stories, the building blocks of all good writing;*
2. *Find the writing niche that's right for you; and,*
3. *Market your writing effectively.*

By the time you finish the program, you will have written at least two manuscripts ready to send to a publisher.

The building blocks of success

America's appetite for writing is enormous. There are over 60,000 publishers who produce two billion books, and hundreds of millions of newspapers, magazines, trade papers, specialty publications and newsletters every year. They all need writers to keep them going—staff writers or freelancers, or both. And these writers use the same building blocks you'll master in *Breaking into Print.*

While many institutions offer classes and courses in writing, *Breaking into Print* is a unique program that pairs you up with a skillful coach who teaches you how to write, helps you to find your writing niche—then shows you *how to sell what you write!*

Free evaluation offered

To identify men and women who are qualified for this exceptional program, we have developed a writing sampler, "Your Writing Evaluation." To receive your free copy and a program brochure, mail the coupon below today.

When you return your sampler, our staff will evaluate it at no cost to you. If it reveals true writing potential, you will be eligible to enroll. But that's entirely your decision.

Long Ridge Writers Group®
Long Ridge Road
West Redding, CT 06896-0802

Yes, I want to find out if I can qualify for *Breaking into Print!* Please send me—FREE—"Your Writing Evaluation" with an illustrated brochure describing your program.

I understand that if my Evaluation reveals true writing potential, I may enroll—but I am under no obligation and no salesman will visit me.

Mr. Mrs. Ms. Miss **RK 2**
(PLEASE CIRCLE ONE)

PRINT NAME CLEARLY

STREET APT.

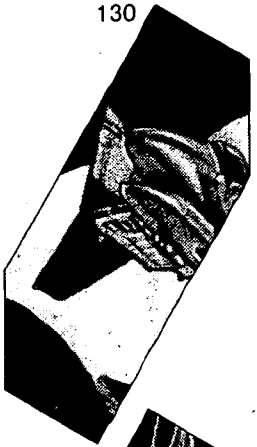
CITY

STATE ZIP

Approved, Connecticut Commissioner of Education

COPYRIGHT © LRWG 1991, A DIVISION OF THE INSTITUTE, INC.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

Vol. 15 No. 3 (Whole Number 168)
March 1991
Next issue on sale
March 5, 1991

Novella

138 Raising Cane — Janet Kagan

Novelettes

16 Water Bringer — Mary Rosenblum
48 Fat Man's Gold — Charles Sheffield
78 The Giving Mouth — Ian R. MacLeod
102 Waltzing on a Dancer's Grave — Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Short Stories

70 Sweetheart — Kathleen J. Alcalá
130 One Perfect Morning, with Jackals — Mike Resnick

Departments

4 Editorial: Suspense I — Isaac Asimov
9 Letters
184 On Books — Baird Searles
192 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Poem by Tony Daniel and Dana Wilde
Cover art for "Water Bringer" by Broeck Steadman

Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director
Joel Davis: President — **Gardner Dozois:** Editor
Sheila Williams: Managing Editor
A. Bruce Chatterton: Publisher — **Terri Czeczko:** Art Director

Published every 28 days with special issues in April and November by Davis Publications, Inc. at $2.50 per copy ($2.95 per copy in Canada). One year subscription $34.95 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $40.50, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. For back issues send $3.50 to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademark of Davis Publications, Inc.

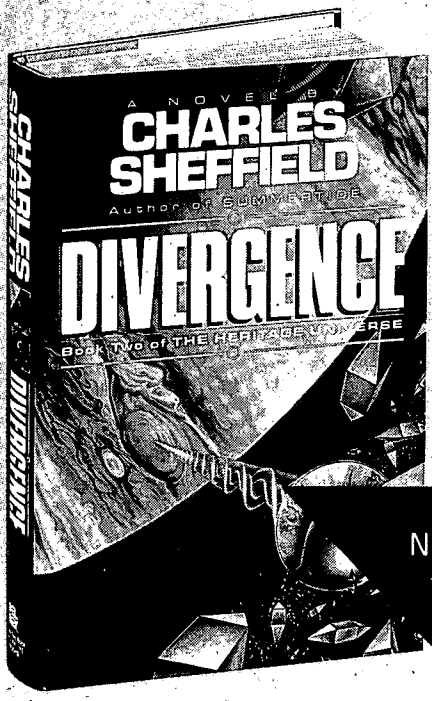
© 1991 by Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10168-0035. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3E1. ISSN 0162-2188.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

An sf *Heritage* grows ...

with the superb sequel to *Summertide*!



The New York Times called *Summertide* a "well-made puzzle story in the manner of Arthur C. Clarke." *The Washington Post* raved, "if anyone can do a better job of this sort, I'd like to know about him."

Now Sheffield returns to the world called Quake, soon after the planetary upheaval that was Summertide.

On sale in February
A Del Rey Hardcover

DEL REY #1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy
Published by Ballantine Books

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORIAL

SUSPENSE I

by Isaac Asimov

I have said over and over again that I write by instinct only and that there is nothing purposeful or deliberate in what I do. Consequently, I am always more or less puzzled by people who analyze my writing and find all sorts of subtle details in it that I don't recall ever putting in but that I suppose must be there or the critic couldn't find them and pull them out.

Still, I have never been so puzzled as recently when I read a discussion of science fiction (where and by whom I do not remember for I threw it out in annoyance as soon as I came across the passage I'm about to tell you of). Getting to me, the essayist mentioned the fact that my style was clumsy, my dialog stilted, my characterization non-existent, but that there was no question that my books were "page-turners." In fact, he said, I was the most reliable producer of "page-turning" writing in science fiction.

It was only after I had thrown out the material and sworn a bit that I began to think of what I had read. What the essayist had said seemed to make no sense. Of course, he might be mad, but suppose, for the sake of argument, that he wasn't. In that case, if I were utterly deficient in style, dialog, and characterization, how could my writings be "page-turners"? Why should any reader want to turn the page (that is, keep on reading) when what he read had nothing to recommend it?

What made a person want to keep on reading anything? The most obvious reason was "suspense," which comes from Latin words meaning "to be hanging"; that is, "to be suspended." The reader finds himself in a painful situation where he is uncertain as to what will happen next in his reading matter, and he wants desperately to find out.

Mind you, suspense is not an inalienable part of literature. No one reads Shakespeare's sonnets in order to experience suspense. Nor do you read a P. G. Wodehouse novel for the sake of suspense. You know that Bertie Wooster will get out of the ridiculous fix in which he finds himself, and you don't really care whether he does or not. You read on only because you enjoy laughing.

Most writing, however, especially in the less exalted realms of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

literature, is kept going by suspense. The simplest form of suspense is to put your protagonist into constant danger, and make it seem certain that he can't possibly get out of it. Then get him out of it just so that you can plunge him into something even worse, and so on. Then, having carried it on as long as you can, you let him emerge victorious.

You get this in its purest simplicity in something like the Flash Gordon comic strip, where, for years, Flash ricocheted from crisis to crisis without ever getting time to wipe his brow (let alone go to the bathroom). Or consider the kind of movie serial typified by *The Perils of Pauline*, in which the perils continued for fifteen installments, each ending a cliffhanger. (This was so-called because the protagonist was left hanging from a cliff or caught in some equally dangerous situation until the next episode of the serial a week later—a week spent by the kid-viewers in delicious agony—resolved the situation.)

This sort of suspense is ultra-simple. Whether Flash or Pauline survives matters really only to Flash or Pauline. Nothing of greater moment hinges on their survival.

We take a step forward in crime novels where upon success or failure may hinge the smooth functioning of justice; or in spy novels where upon success or failure may hinge the survival of the nation; or in science fiction where upon success or failure may hinge the sur-

ISAAC ASIMOV:
Editorial Director
GARDNER DOZOIS:
Editor
SHEILA WILLIAMS:
Managing Editor
IAN RANDAL STROCK:
Assistant Editor
SCOTT L. TOWNER:
Editorial Assistant
A. BRUCE CHATTERTON:
Publisher
TERRI CZECZKO:
Art Director
ANTHONY BARI:
Junior Designer
CAROLE DIXON:
Production Director
CYNTHIA MANSON:
Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights
CONSTANCE SCARBOROUGH:
Contracts Manager
VEENA RAGHAVAN:
Director, Special Projects
CHRISTIAN DORBANDT:
Newsstand Marketing and Promotion
DENNIS JONES:
Newsstand Operations Manager
ELIZABETH BEATTY
Circulation Director
JUDY DORMAN:
Advertising Coordinator
IRENE BOZOKI:
Classified Advertising Manager

ADVERTISING OFFICES
NEW YORK
(212) 557-9100

JOEL DAVIS
President

CARL BARTEE
Vice President
Manufacturing

JOE De FALCO
Vice President
Finance

MARY TZIMOKAS
Vice President
Circulation

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our *manuscript guidelines. To obtain this,* send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" on the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *IAsfm,* Davis Publications, Inc. 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the *interest of time-saving, find out what* we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vival of the Earth itself, or even of the universe.

If we consider Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Space*, which I read as a teenager with the same emotions that I viewed the movie serials half a decade earlier, we find the same unending danger about to destroy our beloved heroes *and* the security of Earth along with them. That gives more meaning and more tension to the story.

Moving still farther up, then, we come to tales of unending danger that involve the great battle between good and evil, almost in the abstract. Surely the best example of this is J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, in which the forces of good, crystallized in the end into the person of brave, suffering little Frodo, must somehow defeat the all-but-omnipotent Satan-figure of Sauron.

Mind you, suspense is not all that is required to make a piece of writing totally effective. In most cases, it suffices only for one reading. Once you have seen *The Perils of Pauline* once, there is no need ever to see it again, because you know how she overcomes all her perils. That removes the suspense, and once the suspense is gone, nothing else remains.

Yet there are suspense-filled items you read over and over again long after the suspense has been knocked out of them. I suppose that it is possible for a person who is reading (or seeing) *Hamlet* for the first time to be caught up most of all in whether Hamlet will defeat his wicked uncle or not. But I have read and seen *Hamlet* dozens of times and I know every word of the play and yet I always enjoy it, because the beauty of the language is sufficient in itself, and the texture of the plot is so thick that one never runs out of different methods of producing the play.

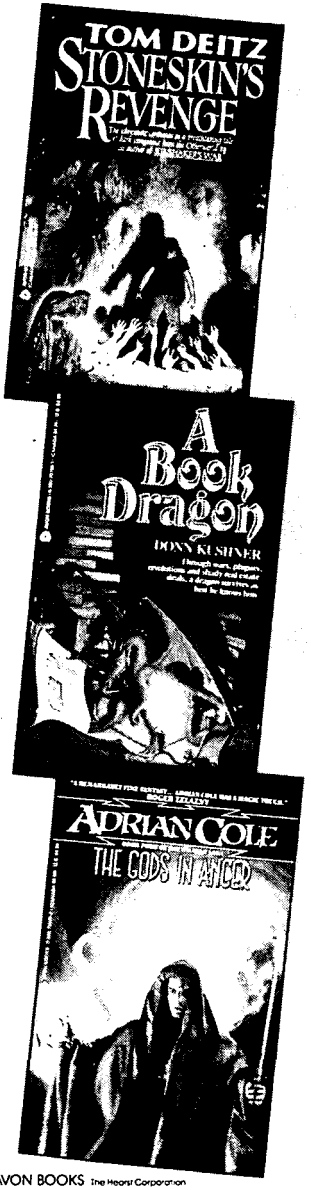
In the same way, I have read *The Lord of the Rings* five times and enjoyed it more each time, because getting the suspense out of the way actually allows me to enjoy the writing and the texture of the book all the more.

Now I come to my own writing, but I can only discuss it if you who are reading it understand that I never did anything of what I am about to describe *purposely*. It all got done, every bit of it, instinctively, and I only understand it now after the fact.

I was interested, apparently, in going beyond the rather simplistic balance between good and evil; I didn't want the hero adventuring with the reader always certain that he *ought* to win over the nasty villains, so that the nation or the society or the Earth or the universe could be saved.

I wanted a situation in which the reader could not be certain which side was good and which evil, or in which he might wonder if perhaps both sides contained mixtures of good and evil. I wanted a situation where the problem and the danger was itself uncertain, and where the resolution was not necessarily a true resolution because it might

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



AVON BOOKS The Hearst Corporation

AVON

THE FINEST IN FANTASY

STONESKIN'S REVENGE
Tom Deitz

The war in Faerie is over—and Calvin McIntosh has returned home. But the young Cherokee brave has unknowingly left the portal to Galunlati open and a dark and evil monster has entered his world.

Calvin, with his newly awakened magic skills, must confront and destroy the insatiable fiend—before it devours humankind!

A BOOK DRAGON
Donn Kushner

Through wars, plagues, revolutions, and shady real estate deals, a dragon survives as best he knows how.

"An engaging and truly original fantasy. Wise as well as amusingly whimsical."
—Kirkus Reviews

BOOK FOUR OF THE OMARAN SAGA: THE GODS IN ANGER
Adrian Cole

The breathtaking conclusion of the epic adventure—humanity makes its final stand in a shadow world dark and terrible.

"Somber and powerful. Fantasy the way the masters have always written it."
—Edward Bryant, Nebula Award-winner

Coming in March 1991

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

conceivably make things worse in the long run.

In short, I wanted to write fictional *history* in which there are no true endings, no true "they lived happily ever after," but in which, even when a problem is apparently solved, a new one arises to take its place.

To this end, I sacrificed everything else. I made no attempt to indulge in anything but necessary description, so that I worked always on a "bare stage." I forced the dialog to serve nothing more than as an indication of the progress of the problem (if there was one) toward the resolution (if there was one). I wasted no time on action for its own sake, or on characterization or on poetic writing. I made everything just as clear and as straightforward as I could, so that the reader could concentrate on (and drive himself mad over) all the ambiguities I would introduce.

(As you see, then, critics who complain that my books are too talky, and that they contain little or no action, miss the point completely.)

I do my best to present a number of characters, each of whom have a different world view and each of whom argues his case as cogently as possible. *Each* of them thinks he is doing the sensible thing, working for the good of humanity, or his part of it. There is no general agreement on what the problem might be, or even, sometimes, whether there is one at all, and when the story ends even the hero himself may not be satisfied with what he has done.

I worked this out little by little in my stories and novels, and it reached its peak in the "Foundation" series.

There is indeed suspense in the series on a simple scale. Will the small world of the First Foundation hold its own against the surrounding mightier kingdoms and, if so, how? Will it survive the onslaught of the Empire and of a mutant emotion-controller, and of the Second Foundation?

But that is not the *prime* suspense. *Should* the First Foundation survive? *Should* there be a Second Empire? Will the Second Empire just be a repetition of the miseries of the First? Are the Traders or the Mayors correct in their view of what the First Foundation ought to do?

In the two later volumes, the hero Golan Trevize spends the first in coming to an agonized decision, and the second in an agonized wonder as to whether his decision was right. In short, I try to introduce all the uncertainties of history, instead of the implausible certainties of an unrealistic fictional world.

And apparently it works, and my novels are "page-turners."

But I have more to say and I will continue my discussion of suspense in next month's editorial. ●

LICENSED TO GNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I cannot describe how your magazine, which I have been buying off the shelf for over a year now, has influenced my reading. Just recently, I decided to buy Allen Steele's *Orbital Decay* on the strength of his stories, "Red Planet Blues" and "Ride to Live, Live to Ride" which your magazine published. While I cannot quite agree with Gregory Benford's comment that it "Reads like Golden Age Heinlein!" on the cover of the book, I can say that it is good, with extremely humorous parts and a heart stopping finale. I look forward to seeing more of his works. As for your magazine, I feel it is one of the best and I'll still buy it over *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* or *Analog* despite the recent rise in its price here in Singapore.

I may be alone in this, but I feel one of the best ways to know whether a new writer ("new" in the sense that I never read his/her stories before) is worth reading is by looking at his/her published stories in magazines like yours. Which was why I decided to get *Orbital Decay*. If I just saw the book without reading his stories in your magazine beforehand, I doubt I would have bought it, despite the appealing cover and the promise of a "hard" SF story, which is what I usually read (the only time I ever broke this rule was to buy Robert L. Forward's *Starquake* and *Dragon's Egg*). I also read, with great interest, the book reviews by Norman Spinrad and Baird Searles. While their reviews won't immediately make me go out and get each book, at least I know what to look for and, if my wallet stretches far enough, I'm more likely to get some of them.

Concerning Norman Spinrad: I mostly agree with what he says in the February 1990 issue of *IAsfm* about the current state of SF and fantasy books on the shelves these days. I find, to my dismay, a lot of these fantasy serials that seem to drag on and on and on and on . . . as well as new series that also drag on and on and on. . . . It's hard to find a good, one book fantasy or SF book these days. But my chief interest, as I've said above, is in "traditional hard" SF which is even harder to find. I have to look in between the Piers Anthony, the Stephen Donaldson, etc. books to spot one or two by authors I know like yourself, Arthur C. Clarke, Larry Niven, Robert Silverberg, the late Robert A. Heinlein (he is one writer whom I will surely miss. I have a love-hate relationship

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with his books; some I love, some I hate!) and others.

What really infuriates me is that the bookshops will only stock the latest SF books! Rarely can I see a book written earlier than the 1980s these days (your "Foundation" stories as well as Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" are two exceptions) unless it is a reprint. It was only pure luck that I got books like Niven & Pournelle's *Footfall* in second-hand book shops (I spotted *The Mote In God's Eye* once but I don't know what made me NOT buy it. I've been regretting it ever since as I can't find it now). Even then, it was tucked away in an obscure part of the SF section. How I wish book shops would start separating the SF from the fantasy, the "popular" series from the more "literary" titles or something to ease my searching.

Yours sincerely,

Soh Kam Yung
Singapore

PS: I got your book, *Azazel*. In my opinion, this book is great and stands with Clarke's *Tales from the White Hart* as one of the greatest "spoof" books I've ever read!

I have frequently made the point that science fiction magazines are the seed-bed of science fiction writers. It is in short stories that they learn their writing skills and demonstrate their writing talents. Thank you for making your closely allied point.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Dozois,

I enjoyed reading the December 1989 issue of *IAsfm* and I hope I am not too late to comment on something said by Norman Spinrad in his essay "Far Far Out" which appeared in your feature On Books. In his article, Mr. Spinrad expresses the opinion that a complete historical record of life will exist from the beginning of the twentieth century until A.D. 1,000,000. Even bearing in mind the numerous historical archives and varied techniques used for storage of data nowadays, I would like to express considerable scepticism on this point.

To begin with, let us look at what remains on Earth of life that existed one million years ago. A few bones have been discovered which might or might not be human. Some incomplete skeletons which could belong to dinosaurs and other animals long extinct. The Earth is a living body and it does not preserve things that are no longer useful.

Looking at more recent times, possibly the oldest cultural artifacts still in existence are cave paintings dating back approximately 20,000 years and these only remain because of their inaccessible locations. Most historical artifacts, such as the pyramids of Egypt and Mexico, the Dead Sea Scrolls and other relics in the Middle East, have survived because of their desert locations. If an Ice Age had come about after their construction, it is very likely they would have been lost forever. Glaciers would have swept them away or vegetation would have swallowed them beyond recognition. If the Dead Sea Scrolls had been written on anything other than clay tablets they would not exist today. Stone-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The writer who captivated millions with
THE CHRONICLES OF THOMAS COVENANT
returns with his most intense novel yet.

STEPHEN R. DONALDSON

THE GAP INTO CONFLICT

THE REAL STORY

The first volume of an explosive new saga: an enthralling epic of courage and redemption in a world of dark powers and dazzling technology.

A Main Selection of the Science Fiction Book Club
A Selection of the Literary Guild

SPECTRA A BANTAM HARDCOVER

Also available on Bantam Audio cassette

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

henge is another example of an ancient monument and although it exists nobody knows its original purpose or how it was built.

The Bible has been in existence for several thousand years. I very much doubt if its original meaning has been retained. Every time it is retranslated I suspect it moves farther away from the original truth. Even if the translators are genuinely trying to be honest and accurate they will express their own preferences when in doubt about original meanings.

Moving to more modern times there is an abundance of cultural and historical data. If this accumulation continues for the next 998,000 years it will be impossible to study it all. There will come a point where someone will have to decide what is and what is not important. During these historical separations of important from trivial facts, it is inevitable that much important data will be lost.

We are living in an era in which discovering information about the past is seen as a safe-haven of refuge from the seemingly insurmountable problems of the future. It is very unlikely that this fascination with history will continue into the distant future. There will be times when knowledge of the past is looked upon with scorn, even hostility. During these "dark ages" it is very likely that much data will be lost and these periods can be expected more than once in the next 998,000 years.

Yours sincerely,

Brian W. G. Procter,
33 St. George's Road,
Hayle, Cornwall, TR27 4AL,
England

In my Foundation stories, which are set only 20,000 years in the future, I postulate that all knowledge of the location of Earth has been lost and that even its bare existence is regarded by many as a myth. The result is that I get lots of complaints that such forgetfulness cannot arise in a mere 20,000 years. The moral of this is that you can't please everybody, and shouldn't even try.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Scanning the SF Conventional Calendar something has caught my attention that gives me pause for amusement. Some of the conventions have little descriptors out to the side like "Art Oriented," "Media Stress," and so on. The one that amuses me is "literary SF" con. I gather that "literary" means SF prose, poetry, and criticism.

Not too many years ago SF convention meant a gathering of people who were interested in prose SF, some poetry, and some criticism. That was all (well, pretty much). Sub-Fandoms arose later. But now SF conventions have entered the age of fractals, those wonderful self referential mathematical figures. We now have "literary SF" as a sub-fandom of a SF fandom and thus a subset of itself!

Sincerely,

Al Jackson
4321 Jim West
Bellaire, Texas 77401

I presume that the phrase "literary science fiction" refers to what I call "print science fiction," to distinguish it from "visual science fiction" which appears in the movies

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and on TV. It is an important distinction that must be made.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Your story "Nightfall" has always been among my favorites so when I came across in a video rental store a movie with the same title with your name on it I naturally rented it.

The movie, I found, was considerably far removed from your story and simply shared the same premise. It's a decent movie in its own right, although not within my usual tastes, but I'd been led to believe by the box cover that I'd be seeing your "version." I know changes must be made in adapting a story for the screen but not so far as altering the basic characters and some of the precepts. If someone wishes to present a radically different interpretation of the theme that's fine, I simply feel they shouldn't lead people to believe it's closely associated with the original.

Perhaps it's simply my seventeen year-old naïvete misconstruing of the facts. I'm just curious about the circumstances surrounding the movie. Did you know the film was to be so far off center?

To balance this letter I'd like to add that I enjoyed the animated feature *Lightyears* you did. I always like it when science fiction comes across well in the movies—I have enough trouble convincing my English teacher that science fiction has "worth."

Thanks for your time!

Tudor Lewis
Omaha, NB

I suppose I'll never live it down. I had nothing to do with the movie version of Nightfall. *Doubleday sold it, in good faith, to people who turned out to be total incompetents. I was never consulted in either the sale or the making of the film, and I presume that those who made it are now back in their playpens with their crayons and Mamma-dolls.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. A.,

I just read your editorial in January 1990's *IAsfm* (sorry, I've been too busy to read it before now—terrible isn't it). My comment is this. As an artist I have no objection if someone doesn't like the same things I do; i.e., "I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like." That's a matter of personal taste. Fine, no problem.

I certainly think the forty million dollars that was spent on Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* was way out of line and a good portion of that money could have gone to support living artists by buying their art. After all, the Americans were the ones that snapped up the nineteenth century French art when it was cheap. (I know, Van Gogh wasn't French, but his work is included in the French neo-impressionism.)

However, I do get upset when people say, in effect, "I don't know anything about art, but I know that (referring to a particular piece) isn't art." Aghh! I've never understood why people equate liking something with its quality. The concept that just because they don't like or understand something it can't possibly be good, drives me

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nuts. I've heard this kind of comment about the work of an artist who I know has an MFA in art—i.e., eight years of intense study with rigorous review of the work by accredited professors.

As you said in your editorial "If a physicist tells me that a certain course of procedure violates the symmetry laws, I'll take his word for it, and won't argue." It's a pity a lot of people out there don't have that same sort of attitude toward trained artists.

Thank you for listening to one of my pet peeves.

Joan Reynolds-Cowles
Salt Lake City, UT

I tend to agree with you. When I encounter art or music or literature that seems meaningless or repulsive to me, I am perfectly ready to admit that the fault may be mine—but it remains meaningless or repulsive to me, anyway.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Considering you are a man for whom English is a second language, I guess it is indeed believable (your editorial in the June *IAsfm*) that you are "not very good at the language." How can you ever expect to be a successful writer, given your paltry command of English? Please don't send in any more manuscripts, except through a recognized agent.

Latinate equivalents of Teutonic (Saxon, actually)? "Torrid" for "hot"? "Frigid" for "cold"? Yikes! Not very equivalent. Have a torrid cup of coffee? Want to stop in the local for a frigid glass of beer? Tsk.

And "nocturnal" for "nightly"? Never, never, nie, nicht. "Diurnal" does have "daily" as a second meaning, but "nocturnal" means only "of the night" or "by night." True, it is possible for one to have nocturnal delivery of the paper, but it don't mean nightly, sirrah.

But given a little more experience with your second language, you'll get the hang of it. Look sometime at the wartime inspirational speeches of that master of English, Winston. He very deliberately chose Saxon-root words almost exclusively, the short, sharp, pungent, intensely memorable language he was famous for. None of that fancy-schmancy Frenchy stuff for him. Saxon for the English, say I, and to the wall with the Norman invaders!

Yours,

Charles Leedham
Peterborough, NH

As a matter of fact, I recognize the non-existence of total synonymity and I believe I point out that "amiable" and "lovable" do not mean quite the same thing, for instance. However, thank you for your encouragement. As soon as I master the English language (if I ever do) I plan to become a writer.

—Isaac Asimov

MOVING? If you want your subscription to *IAsfm* to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the ZIP codes for both, please!) to our subscription department: Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566.

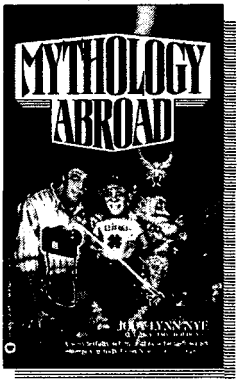
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

N E W S F R O M

Questar
SCIENCE FICTION FANTASY

ELFIN MAGIC IN THE BRITISH ISLES

In the tradition of Alan Dean Foster's Spellsinger series and Piers Anthony's Xanth, the sequel to Mythology 101 is here at last!



For college junior Keith Doyle, a regular old summer vacation in the British Isles becomes an astonishing experience. What starts out as a search for his roots with his friend, Holl (whose ancestors happen to be elves), turns into the adventure of a lifetime. A rankled selkie puts a curse on Keith, but that's only *one* of their problems, as they tangle with all manner of Wee Folk — not to mention a secret agent — and find themselves in the midst of a fantastic mythological odyssey.

The Little People come across as very real....An exceptionally entertaining and unusual contemporary fantasy."
—*Locus* on *Mythology 101*

"A wonderfully whimsical new fantasy writer emerges in Jody Lynn Nye."
-Anne McCaffrey

Cover art by Don Maitz
0-446-36119-4/$4.50
(In Canada: $5.95)

Also read:
Mythology 101
0-445-21021-4/$4.95
(In Canada: $5.95)

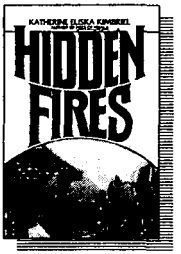
A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

When I was in college I never got the chance to study abroad. In fact, the farthest I traveled from my Brooklyn campus was Syracuse, New York and that was for only a weekend. In a way MYTHOLOGY ABROAD is a perfect vicarious semester-long trip to Ireland, filled with humor, magic, and at least a little bit of education. Even though I graduated years ago, I'm still a student, and working as an editor at Questar has definitely been an education...and when you see me around don't forget to ask for next month's homework assignment.

ALSO THIS MONTH:

HIDDEN FIRES

by Katherine Eliska Kimbriel



In the bestselling tradition of Anne McCaffrey's *Killshandra* series, the long-awaited third volume *in Katherine Eliska Kimbriel's* acclaimed *Nuala* series is here at last!

The hard-won peace on the planet Nuala is threatened by a brilliant psychopath who seeks world domination. Silver, chieftan of Nuala's most powerful tribe, must stop the maniac — even if it means sacrificing her own life to do so...

Cover art by Don Dixon
0-446-36129-1/$4.50
(In Canada: $5.95)

Also read:
Fire Sanctuary
0-445-20275-0 $3.50
(In Canada:$4.50)

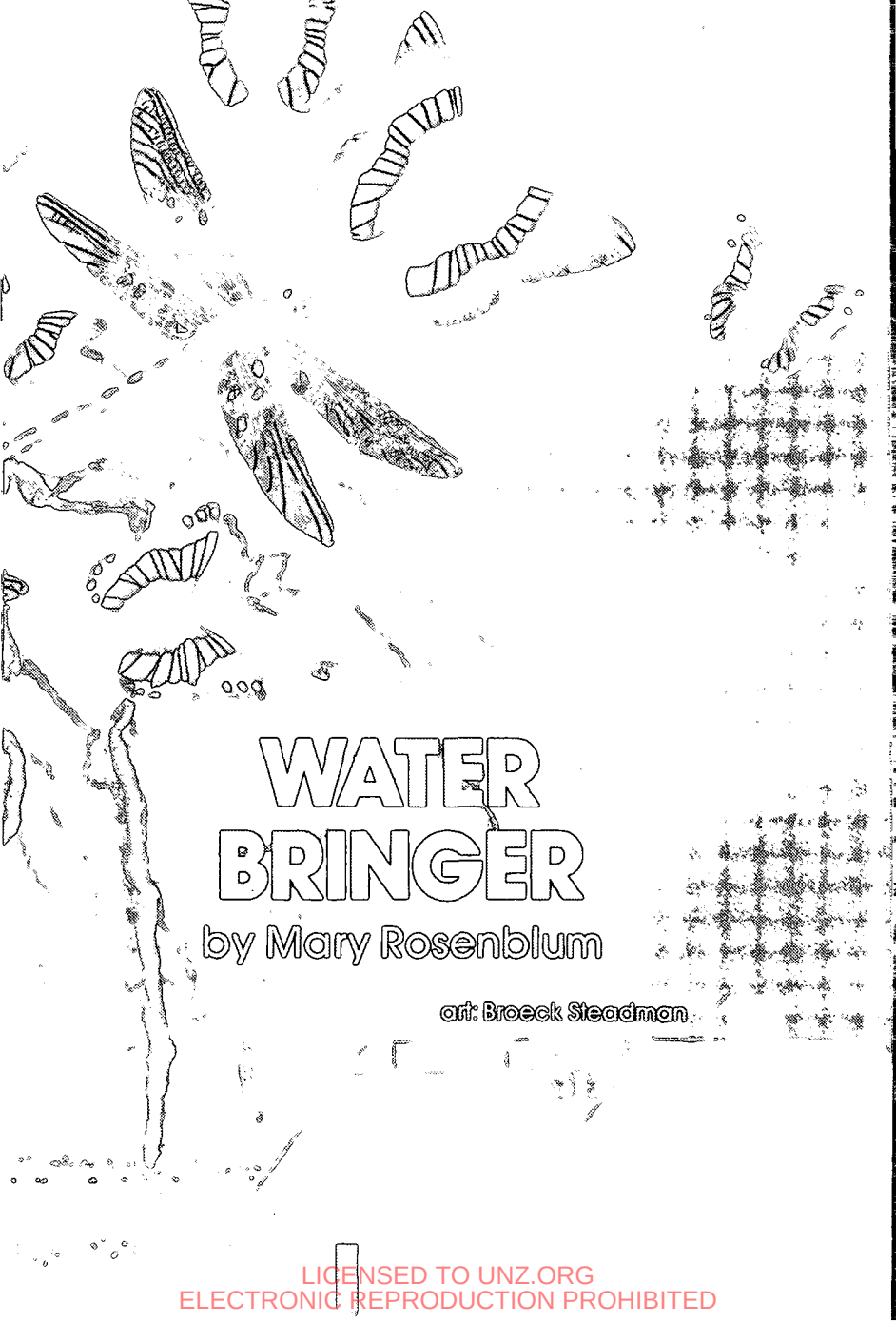
©1990 Warner Books, Inc
Questar is a registered trademark of Warner Books, Inc.

AVAILABLE AT BOOKSTORES EVERYWHERE WARNER BOOKS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Miracles-- both startling and subtle—frame Mary Rosenblum's bittersweet tale of hope and disappointment in a hardened land . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



WATER BRINGER

by Mary Rosenblum

art: Broeck Steadman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sitting with his back against the sunscorched rimrock, Jeremy made the dragonfly appear in the air in front of him. It hovered in the hot, still air, wings shimmering with bluegreen glints. Pretty. He looked automatically over his shoulder, as if Dad might be standing there, face hard and angry. But Dad was down in the dusty fields. So were Jonathan, Mother, Rupert, even the twins—everyone but him.

It was safe.

Jeremy hunched farther into his sliver of shade, frowning at his creation. It was a little too blue—that was it—and the eyes were too small. He frowned, trying to remember the picture in the insect book. The dragonfly's bright body darkened as its eyes swelled.

Bingo. Jeremy smiled and sat up straight. The dragonfly hovered above a withered bush, wings glittering in the sunlight. He sent it darting out over the canyon, leaned over the ledge to watch it.

Far below, a man was leading a packhorse up the main road from the old riverbed. A stranger! Jeremy let the dragonfly vanish as he squinted against the glare. Man and horse walked with their heads down, like they were both tired. Their feet raised brown puffs of dust that hung in the air like smoke.

Jeremy held his breath as the stranger stopped at their road. "Come *on*," Jeremy breathed. "There's nowhere else for two miles."

As if they'd heard him, the pair turned up the rutted track. The man didn't pull on the horse's lead rope—they moved together, like they'd both decided together to stop at the farm.

Jeremy scrambled up over the rimrock and lurched into a shambling run. You didn't see strangers out here very often. Mostly, they stopped at La Grande. The convoys stuck to the interstate, and nobody else went anywhere. Dead grass stems left from the brief spring crackled and snapped under Jeremy's feet, and the hard ground jolted him, stabbing his twisted knees with bright slivers of pain.

At the top of the steep trail that led down to the farm, Jeremy had to slow up. He limped down the slope, licking dust from his lips, breathing quick and hard. They'd hear it all first—all the news—before he even got there. The sparse needles on the dying pines held the heat close to the ground. Dry branches clawed at him, trying to slow him down even more. They wouldn't wait for him. They never did. Suddenly furious, Jeremy swung at the branches with his thickened hands, but they only slapped back at him, scratching his face and arms.

Sure enough, by the time he reached the barnyard the brown-and-white horse was tethered in the dim heat of the sagging barn, unsaddled and drowsing. Everyone would be in the kitchen with the stranger. Jeremy licked his lips. At least there'd be a pitcher of fresh water out. He crossed the sunburned yard and limped up the warped porch steps.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

". . . desertification's finally reached its limit, so the government's putting all its resources into reclamation."

Desertification? Jeremy paused at the door. The word didn't have a clear meaning in his head, but it felt dusty and dry as the fields. He peeked inside. The stranger sat in Dad's place at the big table, surrounded by the whole family. He wore a stained tan shirt with a picture of a castle tower embroidered on the pocket. He had dark curly hair and a long face with a jutting nose. Jeremy pushed the screen door slowly open. The stranger's face reminded him of the canyon wall, all crags and peaks and sharp shadows.

The door slipped through his fingers and banged closed behind him.

"Jeremy?" His mother threw a quick glance at Dad as she turned around. "Where have you been? I was worried."

"He snuck up to the rimrock again," Rupert muttered, just loud enough.

Jeremy flinched, but Dad wasn't looking at him at all. He'd heard, though. His jaw had gotten tight, but he didn't even turn his head. Jeremy felt his face getting hot, and edged toward the door.

"Hi." The stranger's smile pinned Jeremy in place; it crinkled the sun-browned skin around his eyes. "I'm Dan Greely," the stranger said.

"From the Army Engineers!" Ten-year old David announced.

"To bring *water*!" Paulie interrupted his twin.

"You're not supposed to go up there, Jeremy." Mother gave Dad an uneasy, sideways glance. "You could fall."

"So, just how does the Corps of Engineers plan to irrigate the valley when the river's dry as a bone?" Jeremy's father spoke as if no one else had said a word. "God knows, you can't find water when it ain't there to be found."

"Don't be so hard on him, Everett." Mother turned back to Dad.

"I ain't even heard any solid reasons for *why* the damn country's drying up," Dad growled. "Desertification!" He snorted. "Fancy word for no damn water. Tell me *why*, surveyor."

"At least someone's trying to do something about it." Mother was using her soothing tone.

They weren't paying any attention to him any more, not even tattletale Rupert. Jeremy slipped into his favorite place, the crevice between the wood-box and the cold kitchen cookstove.

"We'll be glad to put you up while you're about your business," Mother went on. "It would be like a dream come true for us, if you folks can give us water again. We've all wondered sometimes if we did right to stay here and try to hang on."

"What else *could* we do?" Dad said harshly. "Quit and go work in the Project fields like a bunch of Mex laborers?"

"I can't promise you water," the stranger said gravely. "I'm just the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

surveyor. I hear that some of these deep-aquifer projects have been pretty successful, though."

"It's enough to know that there's hope." Mother's voice had gone rough, like she wanted to cry.

Jeremy started to peek around the stove, but froze as Dad's hand smacked the tabletop.

"He ain't dug any wells *yet*. You kids get back to work. Those beans gotta be weeded by supper, 'cause we're not wasting water on weeds. Jonathan, I know you and Rupert ain't finished your pumping yet."

"Aw, come on," Rupert whined. "We want to hear about stuff. Are people really eating each other in the cities?"

"You heard your father," Mother said sharply. "The wash-bucket's too dirty for supper dishes. Rupert, you take it out to the squash—the last two hills in the end row—and bring me a fresh bucket."

"Aw, Mom!" Rupert said, but he pushed back his chair.

Jeremy scrunched down, listening to the scuffle of his brothers' bare feet as they filed out of the kitchen.

"We don't have much in the way of hay for your pony," Jeremy's father grumbled. "How long are you planning on staying, anyway?"

"Not long. I can give you a voucher for food and shelter. When they set up the construction camp, you just take it to the comptroller for payment."

"Lot of good *money*'ll do me. There wasn't enough rain to make hay worth shit this season. Where'm I going to buy any?"

The screen door banged. Dad was angry. Jeremy frowned and wiggled into a more comfortable position. Why should Dad be angry? The stranger talked about water. Everyone needed water.

"Never mind him." From the clatter, Mother was dishing up bean-and-squash stew left over from lunch. "You have to understand, it's hard for him to hope after all these years." A plate clunked on the table. "You keep pumping water, trying to grow enough to live on, praying the well holds out and watching your kids go to bed hungry. You don't have much energy left for hoping. When you're done, I'll show you your room. The twins can sleep with Jeremy and Rupert."

She sounded like she was going to cry again. Jeremy looked down at his loosely curled fists. The thick joints made his fingers look like knobby tree roots. The stranger said something, but Jeremy didn't catch it. He'd only heard Mother cry once before—when the doctor over in La Grande had told her that there wasn't anything that could be done about his hands or his knees.

This stranger made Dad angry and Mother sad. Jeremy thought about that while he waited, but he couldn't make any sense of it at all. As soon as the stranger and Mother left the kitchen, Jeremy slipped out of his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hiding place. Sure enough, the big plastic pitcher stood on the table, surrounded by empty glasses. You didn't ask for water between meals. Jeremy listened to the quiet. He lifted the pitcher, clutching it tightly in his thick, awkward grip.

The water was almost as warm as the air by now, but it tasted sweet on his dusty throat. He never got enough water. No one did—not when the crops needed it, too. Jeremy swirled the pitcher, watching the last bit of water climb the sides in a miniature whirlpool.

Absently, he made it fill clear to the brim. What would it be like to live in the old days, when it rained all the time and the riverbed was full of water and fish? He imagined a fish, made it appear in the water. He'd seen it in another book, all speckled green with a soft shading of pink on its belly. He made the fish leap out of the pitcher and dive back in, splashing tiny droplets of water that vanished as they fell. Jeremy tilted his head, pleased with himself. Trout—he remembered the fish's name, now.

"Jeremy!"

Jeremy started at his mother's cry and dropped the pitcher. Water and fish vanished as the plastic clattered on the linoleum. Throat tight, he stared at the small puddle of real water. The stranger stood behind Mother in the doorway.

"Go see if there are any eggs." His mother's voice quivered. "Do it right now!"

Jeremy limped out the door without looking at either of them.

"Don't mind him," he heard his mother say breathlessly. "He's clumsy, is all."

She was afraid that the stranger had seen the fish. Jeremy hurried across the oven glare of the barnyard. What if he *had*? What if he said something in front of Dad? His skin twitched with the memory of the last beating Dad had given him, when he'd gotten to daydreaming and made the dragonfly appear in the church. Jeremy shivered.

The stranger's horse snorted at him, pulling back against its halter with a muffled thudding of hooves. "Easy boy, easy." Jeremy stumbled to a halt, stretched out his hand. The pinto shook its thick mane and stretched its neck to sniff. Jeremy smiled as the velvety lips brushed his palm. "You're pretty," he said, but it wasn't true. It wasn't even a horse, really—just a scruffy pony with a thick neck and feet big as dinnerplates.

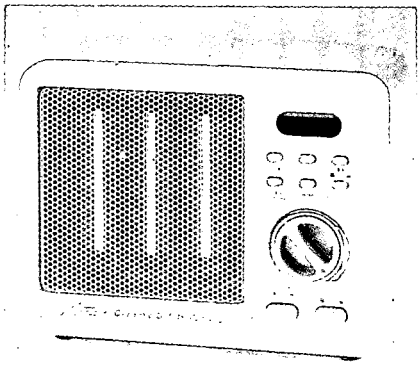
He was ugly. Jeremy sat down stiffly, leaning his back against the old, smooth boards of the barn. "Hey." He wiggled his toes as the pony sniffed at his bare feet. "It's not *your* fault you're ugly." He stroked the pony's nose. "I bet you can run like the wind," he murmured.

The pony's raspy breathing sounded friendly, comforting. Eyes half-closed, Jeremy imagined himself galloping over the sunscorched mead-

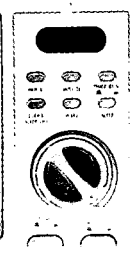
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ FIGHT THE BIG CHILL



Be toasty warm whenever, wherever you want! The Timer, from Aladdin is the safe, compact, energy efficient 1500 watt ceramic heater that really does fight the big chill. Extremely safe (the heating element actually operates below the ignition point of tissue paper), the unit provides instant heat for any room. Plus, it is the only portable heater which features an easy to use programmable timer. So, you can set it once, and enjoy warm mornings while the unit runs for two hours, then shuts itself off. The ingenious "sleep" button lets you fall asleep in warmth, then shuts itself off in an hour. Compact (9"x7"x5") and lightweight, the Timer provides 2,250 BTU's of heat *and features an automatic temperature sensor and a year round fan.* The illuminated digital clock displays hour / minutes, and current settings. The automatic tipover safety switch is an added safety feature. So stop wasting energy and money warming rooms not in use, and fight the big chill with the safe, economical, Timer. UL listed. Manufacturer's 5 yr. limited warranty. **$159.98** ($10.00) #A1961.

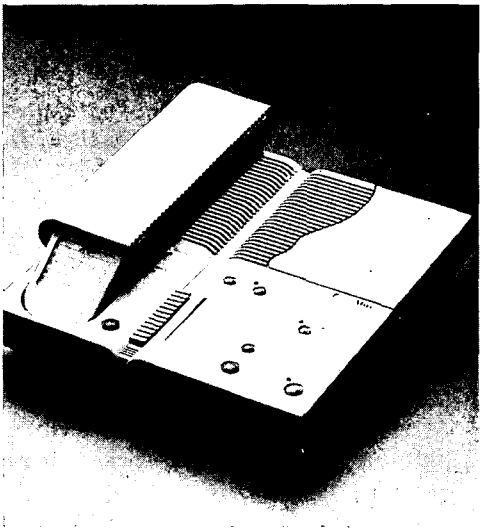


◄ FOOD DEHYDRATOR

Even if it weren't so specially low-priced, this food dehydrator would be immensly economical. Using almost none of your valuable time, it makes nutritious, preservative-free, refined-sugar-free, *healthful* dried fruits and snacks, plus yogurt — at a tiny fraction of their price in stores. Simply slice fruit into lemon juice, spread on the perforated plastic stacking trays and forget it for 12 to 24 hours. With electrical coil at bottom, the unit is engineered for convection heating; no fan needed, so it's energy efficient and noiseless. A 28-page instruction book provides guides for adjustable vents and timing plus enticing recipes. Treat kids to crispy banana chips, make dried apples, apricots, raisins...even beef jerkey and vegetables for soups and camping trips.. try zucchini slices with sesame seeds — a dieter's dream substitute for hi-cal chips. UL Listed 5-tray Dehydrator (shown) **$51.98** ($6.25) #A1887X. 3-tray Dehydrator **$41.98** ($5.25) #A1886X.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

► PHONEMATE® 1850



Phonemate® 1850 combines a state of the art answering machine with a handy cordless telephone. The answering machine features remote call screening, message waiting indicator, beeperless remote allowing you to access messages from most touchtone phones with your two digit access number, and the unit even permits household members to leave and receive messages for each other, independent of phone messages. The phone features an automatic digital security code to prevent unauthorized use of your line and a replaceable battery pack and antenna. Also—tone/pulse dialing, 9 station autodial, last number redial, mute, flash, and programmable pause. So, stay in touch with Phonemate® 1850. **$219.98** ($7.00) #A1972.

▼ NIGHT TRACKER™

Light up your night! Night Tracker™, the cordless, rechargeable hand-held spotlight packs a 500,000 candlepower beam to give you a light whenever, wherever you need it. The beam is 10 times brighter than your automobile headlights and will carry over 1 mile. Operates on rechargeable batteries or recharge it from 110 volt AC outlet or from any 12 volt car or boat outlet. Perfect for home, travel, boating and camping. Made in the USA and comes with a 90 day warranty. Now featured with amber and red lens attachments. **$79.98** ($6.25) #A1975.

◄ ORANGE MAGIC

Citrus oil is a remarkably powerful cleaning agent though safe, gentle, natural and pleasant to use. Orange Magic levitates the toughest dirt and stains. Just spray it on, wait, rinse, and see dirt vanish. It is the New York Transit Authority's cleaner of choice for combatting graffiti in the subways. Two 16oz. pump bottles for **$15.98** ($4.00) #A1342.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 031 IA P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

Magalog Marketing Group Inc. © 1990
1905 Swarthmore Ave., Lakewood, N.J. 08701

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ows. His knees wouldn't matter at all. . . . He drifted off into a dream of wind and galloping hooves.

"Jeremy! It's supper time. Where the hell are you?"

Rupert's voice. Jeremy blinked awake, swallowing a yawn. It was almost dark. Straw tickled his cheek, and he remembered. He was in the barn, and a stranger had seen him make something.

"I know you're in here." Rupert's footsteps crunched closer.

By now, Dad probably knew about the trout. Jeremy rolled onto his stomach and wriggled under the main beam beneath the wall. There was just enough space for his skinny body.

"I hear you, you brat." Rupert's silhouette loomed against the gray rectangle of the doorway. "You think I want to play hide and seek after I work all day? If I get in trouble, I'll *get* you."

The pony laid back its ears and whinnied shrilly.

"Jesus!" Rupert jumped back. "I hope you get your head kicked off!" he yelled.

Jeremy listened to Rupert stomp out of the barn. "Thanks, pony," he whispered as he scrambled out of his hiding place. He shook powdery dust out of his clothes, listening for the slam of the screen door.

Better to face Rupert later than Dad right now.

The pony nudged him, and Jeremy scratched absently at its ear. A bat twittered in the darkness over his head. Jeremy looked up, barely able to make out the flittering shadows coming and going through the gray arch of the doorway. He'd sneak in later. Jeremy's stomach growled as he curled up against the wall of the barn. The pony snuffled softly and moved closer, as if it was glad he was there.

The barn was full of dry creaks and whispers. Something rustled loudly in the loft above Jeremy's head and he started. Funny how darkness *changed* the friendly barn, stretched it out so big. Too big and too dark. "Want to see a firefly?" Jeremy asked the pony. The darkness seemed to swallow his words. It pressed in around him, as if he had made it angry by talking.

He hadn't been able to find a picture . . . The firefly appeared, bright as a candleflame in the darkness. It looked sort of like a glowing moth. That didn't seem right, but its warm glow drove back the darkness. Jeremy examined it thoughtfully. Maybe he should make the wings bigger.

"So I wasn't seeing things," a voice said.

The pony whinnied and Jeremy snuffed out the firefly. Before he could hide, a dazzling beam of light flashed in his eyes. He raised a hand against the hurting glare.

"Sorry." The light dipped, illuminating a circular patch of dust and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jeremy's dirty legs. "So, this is where you've been. Your brother said he couldn't find you." The beam hesitated on Jeremy's lumpy knees.

The surveyor patted the pony and bent to prop the solar flashlight on the floor. Its powerful beam splashed back from the wall, streaking the straw with shadows. "Can you do it again?" he asked. "Make that insect appear, I mean."

Jeremy licked his dry lips. He *had* seen the trout. "I'm not supposed to . . . make things."

"I sort of got that impression." The man gave him a slow, thoughtful smile. "I pretended I didn't notice. I didn't want to get you in trouble."

Jeremy blinked. This stranger—a grown-up—had worried about getting *him* in trouble? The bright, comforting light and the surveyor's amazing claim shut the two of them into a kind of private, magic circle.

Why *not* let him see? He'd already seen the trout, and he hadn't told Dad. The firefly glowed to life in the air between them. "What does a firefly really look like?" Jeremy asked.

"I don't know." The surveyor reached out to touch the making, snatched his hand away as his finger passed through the delicate wings.

"It isn't real. It doesn't even *look* right." Disappointed, Jeremy let it fade and vanish.

"Wow." The surveyor whistled softly. "I've never seen anything like *that*."

He made it sound like Jeremy was doing something wonderful. "Don't tell I showed you, okay?" Jeremy picked at a thread in his ragged cutoffs.

"I won't." The man answered him seriously, as if he was talking to another grownup. "How old are you?" he asked, after a minute.

"Twelve. I'm small for my age." Jeremy watched him pick up his marvelous light and swing its bright beam over the old pony.

"You look pretty settled, Ezra. I'll get you some more water in the morning." The surveyor slapped the pony on the neck. "Come on," he said to Jeremy. "Let's go in. I think your mom left a plate out for you." He gave Jeremy a sideways look. "Your dad went to bed," he said.

"Oh." Jeremy scrambled to his feet, wondering how the stranger knew to say that. If Dad was asleep, it was safe to go back in. Besides, this ungrownuplike man hadn't told on him. "Are you going to bring us water?" he asked.

"No," the man said slowly. "I just make maps. I don't dig wells."

"I bet you're good," Jeremy said. He wanted to say something nice to this man, and that was all he could think of.

"Thanks," the surveyor said, but he sounded more sad than pleased. "I'm pretty good at what I do."

No, he didn't act like a grownup. He didn't act like anyone Jeremy had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ever met. Thoughtfully, he followed the bright beam of the surveyor's flashlight into the house.

Next morning was church-Sunday, but the family got up at dawn as usual, because it was such a long walk into town. Jeremy put on his good pair of shorts and went down to take on Mother in the kitchen.

"You can't go." She shoved a full water-jug into the lunch pack. "It's too far."

She was remembering the dragonfly. "I won't forget. I'll be good." Jeremy said. "Please?"

"Forget it." Rupert glared at him from the doorway. "The freak'll forget and do something weird again."

"That's enough." Mother closed the pack with a jerk. "I'll bring you a new book." She wouldn't meet Jeremy's eyes. "What do you want?"

"I don't know." Jeremy set his jaw. He didn't usually care, didn't like church-Sundays, with all the careful eyes that sneaked like Rupert when they looked at his hands and knees. But this time, the surveyor was going. "I want to *come*," he said.

"Mom . . ."

"I said that's enough." Mother looked past Rupert. "Did you get enough breakfast, Mr. Greely?" she asked too cheerfully.

"More than enough, thanks." The surveyor walked into the kitchen and the conversation ended.

When Jeremy started down the gravel road with them, Mother's lips got tight and Rupert threw him a look that promised trouble, but Dad acted like he wasn't even there, and no one else dared say anything. Jeremy limped along as fast as he could, trying not to fall behind. He had won. He wasn't sure why, but he had.

It was a long, hot walk to town.

Rupert and Jonathan stuck to the surveyor like burrs, asking about the iceberg tugs, the Drylands, Portland, and L.A. The surveyor answered their questions gravely and politely. He wore a fresh tan shirt tucked into his faded jeans. It was clean, and the tower on the pocket made it look like it meant something special.

It meant *water* . . .

Everyone was there by the time they reached the church—except the Menendez family who lived way down the dry creekbed and sometimes didn't come anyway. The Pearson kids were screaming as they took turns jumping off the porch, and Bev LaMont was watching for Jonathan, like she always did.

As soon as they got close enough for people to count the extra person, everyone abandoned their picnic spreads and made for the porch.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What would you do if four hours of your life were suddenly missing?

FEAR

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

Also available on audio cassette

by master storyteller

L. RON HUBBARD

COMING IN JANUARY 1991

Copyright © 1990 Bridge Publications, Inc., All rights reserved.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"This is Mr. Greely, a surveyor with the Army Corps of Engineers," Mother announced as they climbed the wide steps.

"Pleased to meet you." The surveyor's warm smile swept the sun-dried faces. "I've been sent to make a preliminary survey for a federal irrigation project." He perched on the porch railing, like he'd done it a hundred times before. "The new Singhe solar cells are going to power a deepwell pumping operation. We think we've identified a major aquifer in this region."

"How come we ain't heard of this before?" It was bearded Ted Brewster, who ran the Exxon station when he could get gas, speaking up from the back of the crowd.

"Come on, Ted." Fists on her bony hips, gray-haired Sally Brandt raised her voice. "By the time news makes it here from Boise, it's gone through six drunken truckers. They're lucky if they can remember their names."

"No. That's a good question." The surveyor looked around at the small knot of dusty faces. "You don't get any radio or TV?"

"No power, out here." Sally shook her head. "Anyway, we couldn't get TV after Spokane quit. There's too many mountains to pick up Boise, and I don't think there's anything big broadcasting anymore this side of Portland."

The surveyor nodded and reached inside his shirt. "I have a letter from the regional supervisor." He pulled out a white rectangle. "I'm supposed to deliver it to the mayor, city supervisor, or whoever's in charge." He raised his eyebrows expectantly.

A gust of wind whispered across the crowded porch, and no one spoke.

"Most people just *left*." Jeremy's father finally stepped forward, fists in the pockets of his patched jeans. "This was wheat and alfalfa land, from the time the Oregon Territory became a state. You can't farm wheat without water." His voice sounded loud in the silence. "The National Guard come around and told us to go get work on the Columbia River project. That's all the help the *government* was gonna give us. If we stayed, they said, we'd dry up and starve. They didn't really give a shit." He paused. "We don't have a mayor anymore," he said. "There's just us."

The surveyor looked at the dusty faces, one by one. "Like I told Mr. Barlow last night," he said quietly, "I can't promise that we'll find water, or that you'll grow wheat again. I'm only the surveyor."

For a long moment, Jeremy's father stared at the envelope. Then, with a jerky, awkward gesture, he reached out and took it. He pried up the white flap with a blunt thumb, and squinted at the print, forehead wrinkling with effort.

Without a word, he handed the paper to Ted Brewster. Jeremy watched the white paper pass from hand to hand. People held it like it was precious—like it was water. He listened to the dry rustle of the paper. When

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it came around to Dad again, he stuck it into the glass case beside the door of the church. "I hope to God you find water," he said softly.

"Amen," someone said.

"Amen." The ragged mutter ran through the crowd.

After that, everyone broke up. After the Reverend had died in the big dust storm, they'd moved the pews outside. Families spread cloths on the long, rickety tables inside. There weren't any more sermons, but people still came to eat together on church-Sundays. The surveyor wandered from group to group in the colored shadows of the church, eating the food people pressed on him. They crowded him, talking, brushing up against him, as if his touch would bring good luck, bring water to the dead fields.

Jeremy hung back, under the blue-and-green diamonds of the stained-glass window. Finally, he went down the narrow stairs to the sparse shelves of the basement library. He found a little paperback book on insects, but it didn't have a picture of a firefly. He tossed it back onto the shelf. When it fell onto the dusty concrete floor, he kicked it, feeling both guilty and pleased when it skittered out of sight under a shelf. Upstairs, the surveyor was giving everyone the same warm grin that he'd given to Jeremy in the barn last night.

It made Jeremy's stomach ball up into an angry knot.

He wandered outside and found little Rita Menendez poking at ants on the front walk. Mrs. Menenedez was yelling at the older kids as she started to unpack the lunch, so Jeremy carried Rita off into the dappled shade under the scraggly shrubs. She was too little to mind his hands. Belly still tight, Jeremy made a bright green frog appear on Rita's knee.

Her gurgly laugh eased some of the tightness. *She* liked his makings. He turned the frog into the dragonfly and she grabbed at it. This time, Jeremy heard the surveyor coming. By the time the man pushed the brittle branches aside, the dragonfly was gone.

"Do you always hide?" He reached down to tickle Rita's plump chin.

"I'm not hiding." Jeremy peeked up through his sun-bleached hair.

"I need someone to help me." The surveyor squatted, so that Jeremy had to meet his eyes. "I talked to your father and he said I could hire you. If you agree. The Corps' only paying crisis-minimum," he said apologetically.

Jeremy pushed Rita gently off his lap. This man wanted to hire *him*—with his bad knees and his lumpy, useless hands? Hiring was something from the old days, like the flashlight and this man's clean, creased shirt.

Jeremy wiped his hands on his pants, pressing hard, as if by doing so he might straighten his bent fingers. "I'd like that, Mr. Greely," he said breathlessly.

"Good." The man smiled like he meant it. "We'll get started first thing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tomorrow." He stood, giving Rita a final pat that made her chuckle. "Call me Dan," he said. "Okay?"

"Okay, Dan," Jeremy said softly. He watched the man walk away, feeling warm inside.

Jeremy didn't see much of Dan Greely before the next morning. It seemed like everyone had to talk to Dan about watertables, aquifers, deep wells, and the Army Corps of Engineers. They said the words like the Reverend used to say prayers. *Army Corps of Engineers.*

Dan, Dad, and Jonathan stayed in town. Mother shepherded the rest of them home. The twins were tired, but Rupert was pissed because he couldn't stay, too. He shoved Jeremy whenever Mother wasn't looking.

"I hope you work hard for Mr. Greely," Mother said when she came up to say goodnight. The twins were already snoring in the hot darkness of the attic room.

"Waste of time to hire *him*," Rupert growled from his bed. "The pony'd be more use."

"That's enough." Mother's voice sounded sharp as a new nail. "We can't spare either you or Jonathan from the pumping, so don't get yourself worked up. You don't *have* to go with him," she said to Jeremy. Her hand trembled just a little as she brushed the hair back from his forehead.

She was worried. "It'll be okay," Jeremy murmured. He wondered why. He almost told her that Dan already knew about the making and wouldn't tell, but Rupert was listening. "I'll do good," he said, and wished he believed it.

It took Jeremy a long time to fall asleep, but, when he did, it seemed like only moments had passed before he woke up again. At first, he thought Mother was calling him for breakfast. It was still dark, but the east window showed faint gray.

There it was again—Mother's voice. Too wide awake to fall back to sleep, Jeremy slipped out of bed and tiptoed into the dark hall.

"Stop worrying." Dad's low growl drifted through the half-open door. "What do you think he's gonna do? Eat the kid?"

"I don't know. He said he needed a helper, but what . . ."

"What can Jeremy do? He can't do shit, but Greely's gonna pay wages, and we can use anything we can get." Dad's voice sounded like the dry, scouring winds. "How do you think I felt when I had to go crawling to the Brewsters and the Pearsons for food last winter?"

"It wasn't Jeremy's fault, Everett, the well giving out."

"No one *else* has an extra mouth to feed. No one but me, and I've gotta go begging."

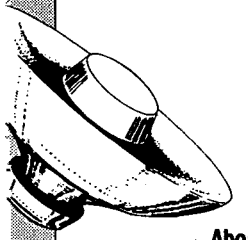
"I lost three babies after Rupert." Mother's voice sounded high and tight. "I couldn't of stood losing another."

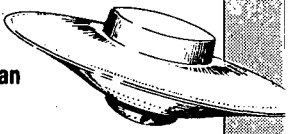
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FOR A CRUISE VACATION THAT WILL BE "OUT OF THIS WORLD"

Don't Miss Davis Publications'

SCIENCE FICTION CRUISE '91





Sailing To The Beautiful Eastern Caribbean
From Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
OCTOBER 19, 1991
Aboard Holland America Line's Fabulous Luxury Liner
M.S. WESTERDAM

Join top writer JOE HALDEMAN and Writer and Editor STANLEY SCHMIDT for seven fun-filled days aboard one of the universe's great cruise ships sailing to some of our world's great Ports-Of-Call: San Juan, Puerto Rico; Virgin Gorda, B.V.I.; Tortola, B.V.I.; St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands; and Nassau, Bahamas.

Enjoy the best that luxury cruising offers PLUS lots of special SCIENCE FICTION CRUISE events including: Private Sessions With our Experts, Open Bar Cocktail Parties, Trivia Contests, Special Gifts, and LOTS of Surprises! Create new worlds with Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Schmidt as they guide you through an imaginative story telling adventure! Prices for SCIENCE FICTION CRUISE '91 include round-trip air fare and start at only $1209 per person, double occupancy from most major cities. There is limited availability in some cabin categories. First come, first served.

BOOK EARLY.....SPACE IS LIMITED.....PAYMENT PLAN IS AVAILABLE

To be part of this fabulous week and to receive all the special amenities, you *must* book your cruise with:

OMNI GROUP CRUISES, INC.
6513 Hollywood Blvd. Ste. 205, Hollywood, CA 90028
Write or call for information
(800) 876-OMNI or (213) 467-6313

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jeremy fumbled his way down the hall, teeth clenched so hard they felt like they were going to break. *No one else has an extra mouth to feed.* His father's cold words chased him down the stairs. *No one but me.*

A light glowed in the barn's darkness. "Hi." Dan pulled a strap tight on the pony's packsaddle. "I was just going to come wake you. Ezra and I are used to starting at dawn." He tugged on the pack, nodded to himself. "Have you eaten yet?" he asked Jeremy.

"Yeah," Jeremy lied.

Dan gave him a searching look, then shrugged. "Okay. Let's go."

It was just light enough to see as they started down the track. The pony stepped over the thin white pipe that carried water from the well to the field. Above them, the old bicycle frame of the pump looked like a skeleton sticking up out of the gray dirt. In an hour, Jonathan would be pedaling hard to get his gallons pumped. Then Rupert would take over. The twins would be carrying the yoked pails, and dipping out precious water to each thirsty plant.

"Did your dad make that?" Dan nodded at the metal frame.

"Uh huh." Jeremy walked a little faster, trying not to limp.

He had had a thousand questions about the outside world to ask, but the sharp whispers in the upstairs hall had dried them up like the wind dried up a puddle. He watched Ezra's big feet kick up the brown dust, feeling dry and empty inside.

"We'll start here." The surveyor pulled Ezra to a halt. They were looking down on the dry riverbed and the narrow, rusty bridge. The road went across the riverbed now. It was easier.

The pony waited patiently, head drooping, while Dan unloaded it. "This machine measures distance by bouncing a beam of light off a mirror." Dan set the cracked plastic case down on the ground. "It sits on this tripod and the reflector goes on the other one." He unloaded a water jug, lunch, an axe, a steel tape measure and other odds and ends. "Now, we get to work," he said when he was done.

Sweat stuck Jeremy's hair to his face as he struggled across the sun-baked clay after Dan. They set up the machine and reflector, took them down and set them up somewhere else. Sometimes Dan hacked a path through the dry brush. It was hard going. In spite of all he could do, Jeremy was limping badly by mid-morning.

"I'm sorry." Dan stopped abruptly. "You keep up so well, it's easy to forget that you hurt."

His tone was matter of fact, without a trace of pity. There was a knot in Jeremy's throat as Dan boosted him onto Ezra's back. He sat up straight on the hard packsaddle, arms tight around the precious machine. It felt heavy, dense with the magic that would call water out of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ground. Jeremy tried to imagine the gullied dun hills all green, with blue water tumbling down the old riverbed.

If there was plenty of water, it wouldn't matter so much that he couldn't pump or carry buckets.

Jeremy thought about water while he held what Dan gave him to hold, and, once or twice, pushed buttons on the distance machine. He could manage that much. It hummed under his touch and bright red numbers winked in a tiny window. He had to remember them, because his fingers were too clumsy to write them down in Dan's brown notebook.

Dan didn't really need any help with the measuring. Jeremy stood beside the magic machine, watching a single hawk circle in the hard blue sky. Mother had been right. Dan wanted something else from him.

Well, that was okay. Jeremy shrugged as the hawk drifted off southward. No one else thought he had *anything* to offer.

The sun stood high overhead when they stopped for lunch. It poured searing light down on the land, sucking up their sweat. Dan and Jeremy huddled in a narrow strip of shade beneath the canyon wall. Ezra stood in front of them, head down, tail whisking.

They shared warm, plastic-tasting water with the pony, and Dan produced dried apple slices from the lunch pack. He had stripped off his shirt, and sweat gleamed like oil on his brown shoulders. His eyes were gray, Jeremy noticed. They looked bright in his dark face.

"Why do you have to do all this stuff?" Awkwardly, Jeremy scooped up a leathery disc of dried apple. The tart sweetness filled his mouth with a rush of saliva.

"I'm making a map of the ground." Dan shaded his eyes, squinting into the shimmering heat-haze. "They have to know all the humps, hollows, and slopes before they can decide how to build a road or plan buildings."

"I was trying to imagine lots of water." Jeremy reached for another apple slice. "It's hard."

"Yeah," Dan said harshly. "Well, don't start counting the days yet." He shook himself and his expression softened. "Tell me about your fireflies and your fish that jump out of pitchers."

"Not much to tell." Jeremy looked away from Dan's intent gray eyes. Was *that* what he wanted? "If I think of something hard enough, you can see it. It's not real. It's not any *good* for anything." Jeremy drew a zigzag pattern in the dust with his fingers. "It . . . bothers people," he said.

"Like your mom and dad."

"Dad doesn't like it." Jeremy smoothed the lines away.

"What about your mother? What about the other folk?" Dan prodded.

"Dad doesn't let us talk about it. I don't make things where people can see." Mostly. Jeremy shifted uneasily, remembering the dragonfly.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Is that why you hide?" Dan was looking at him.

"The Pearsons had a baby with joints like mine. So did Sally Brandt—from the dust or the water, or something in it." Jeremy spread his thick, clumsy hands. "They . . . died," he said. "There isn't enough water for extra mouths."

"Who said that?" Dan asked in a hard, quiet voice.

I lost three babies Mother had cried in that scary voice. *I couldn't stand to lose another.*

Their old nanny goat had had a kid with an extra leg last spring. Dad had taken the biggest knife from the kitchen and cut its throat by a bean hill, so that the blood would water the seedlings. The apple slice in Jeremy's mouth tasted like dust. Feeling stony hard inside, he made the dragonfly appear, sent it darting through the air to land on Dan's knee with a glitter of wings.

"Holy shit." Dried apples scattered in the dust as Dan flinched. "I can almost believe that I feel it," he breathed.

He wasn't angry. Jeremy sighed as the shimmering wings blurred and vanished.

"I don't believe it." Dan stared at the space where the making had been. "Yes, I *do* believe it, but it's fantastic!" He slapped Jeremy lightly on the shoulder, a slow smile spreading across his face. "We could be the hottest thing in this whole damn dry country, kid. *Think* of it. The hicks would fall all over themselves to come see a show like that! *Hoo* . . . ey." His grin faded suddenly.

"You're afraid of doing it, aren't you?" Dan asked softly. "Because it scares your Dad?"

Scared? Not Dad. Jeremy shook his head. Rupert was scared of the brown lizards that lived under the rocks out back. He killed them all the time. But Dad wasn't scared of the makings. He *hated* them.

"Look at this." Dan yanked a grubby red bandana out of his pocket and dangled it in front of Jeremy's eyes. He stuffed the cloth into his closed fist. "Abracadabra . . ." He waved his hand around. "Watch closely, and . . . ta da." He snapped open his hand.

Jeremy stared at his empty palm.

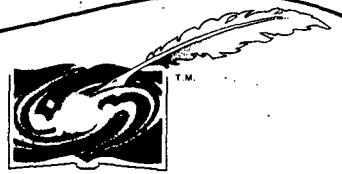
"Your handkerchief, sir." With a flourish, Dan reached behind Jeremy's head and twitched the bandana into view.

"Wow." Jeremy touched the handkerchief. "How did you do that?"

"It's pretty easy." Dan looked sad as he stuffed the bandana back into his pocket. "The card tricks, juggling—it's not enough to keep you in water out here in the Dry. The sun's baked all the *belief* out of people. It would take a miracle to get some attention." He stared solemnly at Jeremy. "*You're* that kind of a miracle," he said.

Dan acted like the making was a wonderful thing, not something

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



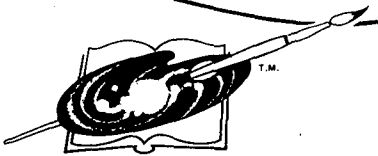
L. Ron Hubbard's
Writers of The Future® Contest

AN INTERNATIONAL SEARCH FOR NEW AND AMATEUR WRITERS OF NEW SHORT STORIES OR NOVELETS OF SCIENCE FICTION OR FANTASY

No Entry Fee *Entrants Retain All Rights*

- *All Awards Adjudicated by Professional Writers only. Algis Budrys, Co-ordinating Judge*
- *Prizes Every Three Months: $1000, $750, $500*
- *Annual Grand Prize: $4000 ADDITIONAL!*

For Contest rules, send an SASE to: ***L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of The Future Contest***
P.O. Box 1630
Los Angeles, CA 90078



L. Ron Hubbard's
ILLUSTRATORS OF THE FUTURE™ CONTEST

OPEN TO NEW SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY ARTISTS WORLDWIDE

No Entry Fee *Entrants Retain All Rights*

- *All Judging by Professional Artists Only Frank Kelly-Freas, Co-ordinating Judge*
- *$1500 in Prizes Each Quarter*
- *Quarterly Winners compete for $4,000 additional ANNUAL PRIZE*

For Contest rules, send an SASE to: ***L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of The Future Contest***
P.O. Box 3190
Los Angeles, CA 90078

Copyright © 1990 L. Ron Hubbard Library. All rights reserved. WRITERS OF THE FUTURE, ILLUSTRATORS OF THE FUTURE and their logos are trademarks owned by L.Ron Hubbard Library and are used with its approval.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shameful, not something that made Dad have to ask the Brewsters for food. Suddenly unsure, Jeremy bent to scoop up the apples that Dan had dropped. "You don't want to waste these."

"I'd give a lot for your talent." Dan's eyes gleamed like water.

Talent? Jeremy dumped the withered rings of apple into the pack, struggling to understand Dan's tone. "You're a surveyor," he said. "You don't *need* to do tricks."

"I guess I am." Dan's laugh sounded bitter. "So I guess we'd better get back to surveying." He got to his feet.

Strange feelings fluttered in Jeremy's chest. Could Dan be right? Would people really look at him like Dan had looked at him, all excited and envious? What if Dan was *wrong*? What if everyone looked at him like *Dad* did, instead?

He could find out. If he went with Dan.

Jeremy thought about that—going with Dan—for the rest of the day, while he steadied the machine and pushed buttons. It excited him and scared him shitless at the same time, but he didn't say anything to Dan.

Dan might not want him to come along.

It seemed like everyone within walking distance was waiting at the house when they plodded back to the farm that evening. People had brought food and water, because you didn't ask for hospitality, not anymore. Covered dishes and water jugs cluttered the kitchen table, and Dan was swept into the crowd and out of Jeremy's reach.

Dan didn't belong to him here, in the dusty house. Here, Dan belonged to the grown-ups and the Army Corps of Engineers. It was only when they were out in the dry hills with Ezra that Dan would be his. Jeremy slipped away to his barn sanctuary to pet Ezra and think.

What would happen if he walked away from the peeling old house? Dad wouldn't have to ask the Brewsters for food then, Jeremy thought, and he pulled at the pony's tangled mane until the coarse horsehair cut his fingers.

After the first three days, the crowd waiting at the farm had thinned out. They'd heard what news Dan had to tell. They'd sold him the food and supplies that he'd asked for, taking his pale-green voucher slips as payment. Now they were waiting for the construction crews to arrive. Even Dad was waiting. He whistled while he carried water to the potato plants, and he smiled at Dan.

Dan was the water bringer. *Everyone* smiled at Dan.

It made Jeremy jealous when they were at home, but they weren't home very often. He and Dan trudged all over the scorched hills along the river. Dan talked about cities and about the Dryland beyond the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fields, with its ghosts and the bones of dead towns. He told Jeremy unbelievable stories about the shrinking sea and the ice getting thicker up north, maybe getting ready to slide southward and bury the Dry. He taught Jeremy how to describe the land in numbers. He asked Jeremy to make things every day, and he laughed when Jeremy made a frog appear on Ezra's head.

Jeremy tried hard to make Dan laugh. His face and hands got scratched by the brittle scrub and his knees hurt all the time, but it was worth it. Dan never asked him outright, but he talked like Jeremy was going to come with him to the cities and the sea. Both of them understood it, and the understanding was a comfortable thing between them.

"Where did you come from?" Jeremy asked on Saturday afternoon. They were eating lunch under the same overhang where they'd stopped the first day out.

"The Corps' regional office at Bonneville."

"No, I don't mean that." Jeremy swallowed cold beans. "I mean *before* that—before the surveying. Where were you born?"

"South." Dan looked out toward the dead river. His gray eyes looked vague, like he was looking at something far away or deep inside his head.

"Everyone thought it would be a war," he said, after a while. "No one really believed that the *weather* could do us in." He gave a jerky shrug. "We came north from L.A., running from the Mex wars and the gangs." His eyes flickered. "California was dying, and if anyone had water in the Valley, they weren't sharing, so we kept on going. You leave everything behind you when you're dying of thirst—one piece at a time. Everything." He was silent for a moment. The wind blew grit across the rocks with a soft hiss and Jeremy didn't make a sound.

"I ended up with the Corps," Dan said abruptly.

The transition from *we* to *I* cut off Jeremy's questions like a knife. He watched Dan toss a pebble down the slope. It bounced off an elk skull half-buried in drifted dust.

"I won't kid you about things." Dan tossed another pebble at the bleached skull. "If you come with me, you're going to find out that things aren't always what they should be. When you're on the road, you don't have any options. You do what it takes to stay alive. Sometimes you don't like it much, but you *do* it."

The sad bitterness in Dan's tone scared Jeremy a little, but it didn't matter. Dan had said *if you come with me.*

If you come with me.

"Can you make a face?" Dan asked suddenly.

"I don't know." Jeremy looked into Dan's bleak, hungry eyes. "I'll try," he said uncertainly.

"She was about sixteen, with brown eyes and black hair. It was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

straight, like rain falling." His eyes focused on that invisible something again. "She looked a little like me, but prettier," he said. "Her nose was thin—I used to kid her about it—and she smiled a lot."

Straight black hair; thin nose . . . Jeremy shaped a face in his mind, watched it take shape in the air. No. That was *wrong*. He didn't need Dan's look of disappointment to tell him so.

"Stupid to play that kind of game." Dan laid his hand on Jeremy's shoulder. "Thanks for trying."

Jeremy shook his head, wanting to do this more than he'd ever wanted to do anything in his life. The face was wrong, but barely wrong. He could *feel* it. If he just changed it a little, maybe smoothed the forehead like *so*, widened the nose, it might be . . .

Right.

She smiled, face brimming with warmth and sadness. Jeremy stared at her, sweat stinging his eyes. She was *right* in a way that no bird or fish or animal had ever been right.

"Amy!" Dan cried brokenly. "Oh God, Amy!"

The sound of Dan's voice scared Jeremy. He felt the making slip and tried to hang on, but the face wavered, blurred, and vanished. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Dan buried his face in his hands. That was scarier than if he'd cried or yelled. Hesitantly, Jeremy reached out and touched him.

"It's all right." Dan raised his head, drew a long breath. "You did what I asked, didn't you?" His eyes were dry as the riverbed. "I didn't know. . . ." He got up suddenly. "Let's go back." He looked down the dead valley. "I'm through here."

"You mean all through? Like you're leaving?" Jeremy forced the words through the sudden tightness in his throat.

"Yeah." Dan looked down at him. "The job's finished. I didn't expect to be here this long. I shouldn't have stayed this long." His shoulders lifted as he took a long, slow breath. "Are you coming?"

"Yes." Jeremy stood up as straight as he could. There was nothing for him here. Nothing at all. "I'm coming," he said.

"Good." Dan boosted him onto Ezra's back. "I'm leaving early," he said. "You better not tell your folks."

"I won't," Jeremy said.

No one was pumping on the bicycle frame as they plodded past. Jeremy looked up at the brown hillside, imagining it all green with grass, like in pictures. Water would come, Dad would be happy, and *he* would be with Dan. Mother would cry, but she wouldn't have to protect him from Dad any more.

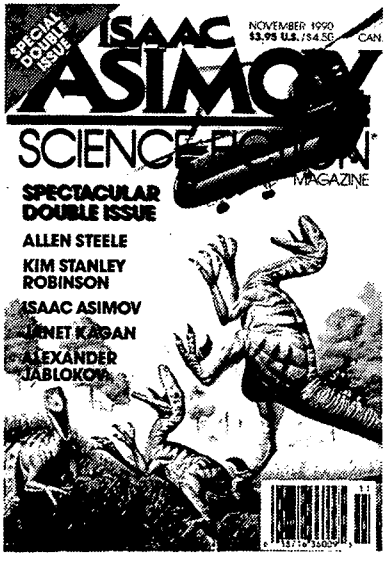
The green landscape wouldn't take shape in his mind. Ezra broke into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THIS YEAR ENTER ANOTHER DIMENSION.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND SAVE 29% OFF THE BASIC PRICE

1-800-333-4108



☐ Please send me 18 issue of ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE for only $29.50—I save 29% off the basic price.

☐ Please send me 12 issues for only $19.97.

ISAAC ASIMOV's SCIENCE FICTION®

P.O. Box 7058
Red Oak. IA 51591

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

HTSC-8

Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery of first issue. *Outside US & Poss. 12 for $25.97, 18 for $38.75.*
All foreign orders must be paid in advance in U.S. currency.

ADDRESSED TO MAY 1990
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a jouncing trot, and Jeremy had to grab the saddle as the pony headed for the barnyard and the watertub there.

"Mr. Greely," Dad called from the porch.

Jeremy stiffened. Dad sounded cold and mad, like when he caught Jeremy making.

"We want to talk to you."

Mr. Brewster stepped onto the porch behind him. Rupert and Jonathan followed, with Mr. Mendoza, Sally Brandt, and the Deardorf boys.

Mr. Mendoza had his old deer rifle. They all looked angry.

"My brother got into town last night." Sally's voice was shrill. "He told me about this scam he heard of back in Pendleton. Seems this guy goes around to little towns pretending to be a surveyor. He buys things with vouchers from the Army Corps of Engineers."

"We searched your stuff." Ted Brewster held up a fist full of white. "You carry a few spare letters, don't you?" He opened his hand. "You're a fake," he said harshly.

The white envelopes fluttered to the dusty ground like dead leaves. Stunned by the anger of the crowd, Jeremy turned to Dan, waiting for him to explain, waiting for Dan to tell them how they were wrong, waiting for him to remind them about the *water*.

"Dan?" he whispered.

Dan looked at him finally, his head moving slowly on his neck, and Jeremy felt his insides going numb and dead. "Mother gave you dried apples." Jeremy swallowed, remembering the tears and hope in her voice. "Dried apples are for birthdays."

For one instant, Dan's gray eyes filled with hurt. Then he looked away, turning a bland smile on the approaching adults. "I heard about some bastard doing that." He spread his hands. "But *I'm* legit." He plucked at the black insignia on his sweaty shirt.

Dad took one long step forward and smashed his fist into Dan's face. "He described you." He looked down as Dan sprawled in the dirt. "He described you real well."

Dan got up very slowly, wiping dust from his face. Blood smeared his chin. He shrugged. They took him into town, walking around him in a loose ring. Jeremy stood in the road, watching the dust settle behind them. Even if Mr. Mendoza didn't have the gun, Dan couldn't run. The dry hills brooded on every side. Where would he run *to*? Jeremy climbed up onto the rimrock, and didn't come down until it got dark.

"I wondered about that guy," Rupert sneered as they got ready for bed that night. "Federal survey, huh? The feds couldn't even hang onto the Columbia Project! I don't know how anybody could believe him."

"Hope is a tempting thing." Jeremy's mother leaned against the doorway. She hadn't scolded Jeremy for running off. "If there was any water

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around here, no matter how deep, someone would have drilled for it a long time ago." Her voice was tired. "I guess we all just *wanted* to hope."

Jeremy climbed onto his cot without looking at her.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I'm sorry for us, and I'm sorry for him, too."

"They'll *hang* him—like they did to that trucker over in La Grande."

"Shame on you, Rupert." Her voice caught a little.

Jeremy buried his face in his pillow. She was feeling sorry for him, and he didn't want anyone to feel sorry for him. I hate him, too, he thought fiercely. Why couldn't Dan have been what he said? He could have gone with Dan, *made* things for him. Now, they'd always have to pump, and he would always be an extra mouth to Dad. A *useless* mouth.

"They're gonna *hang* him," Rupert whispered to Jeremy after Mother had left. He sounded smug. "No wonder that jerk wanted *you* to help him. You're too damn dumb to figure out he was a fake!"

Jeremy pressed his face into the pillow until he could barely breathe. If he made a sound, if he moved, he'd kill Rupert. Rupert might be almost sixteen and Jeremy's hands might not work very well, but he'd kill Rupert, somehow.

Rupert was right. They were going to hang Dan. He'd seen it in their eyes when they walked up to him. It wasn't just because he'd tricked them. They hated Dan because the government, the Army Corps of Engineers, didn't *really* care about them.

No one cared. And Dan had made them see it.

He lied to me, too. Jeremy burrowed deeper into the pillow, but he kept hearing Dan's sad-bitter voice. *You do what it takes to stay alive. Sometimes you don't like it much, but you do it.*

Dan hadn't lied to *him*.

Jeremy must have fallen asleep, because he woke up from a dream of the woman with the black hair. Like rain, Dan had said. Jeremy opened his eyes. His throat hurt, as if he had been crying in his sleep. Amy, Dan had cried. She was dead, whoever she had been. Dan's *we* had turned into *I*.

Rupert snored, arm hanging over the side of his mattress. The sloping roof pressed down on Jeremy, threatening to crush him, trying to smear him into the dry darkness, dissolve him. Where was Dan now? In the church? Jeremy sat up, pushing against the heavy darkness, heart pounding with the knowledge of what he had to do. The house creaked softly to itself as he tiptoed down the steep stairs.

"Who's there?" his father said from the bottom of the stairway.

"Me." Jeremy froze, clutching the railing with both hands. "I . . . had to pee," he stammered. It was a feeble lie—the pot in the bedroom was never full.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Jeremy?" His father bulked over him, a tower of shadow. "It's late. I just got back from town." He ran a thick hand across his face. "You liked Greely."

It was an accusation. "I still like him." Jeremy forced himself to stand straight. "He's not a bad man."

His father grunted, moved down a step. "He's a parasite," he said harshly. "His kind live on other people's sweat. You got to understand that. You got to understand that there's no worse crime than that."

"Isn't there?" Jeremy's voice trembled. "Who's going to share with *him?* Who's going to let him have a piece of their orchard or a field? He was just trying to live, and he didn't hurt anybody, not really . . ."

"He lied to us and he stole from us." His tone dismissed Dan, judged and sentenced him. "You get back to bed. Now!"

"No." Jeremy's knees were shaking and he clung to the railing. "If it doesn't help the crops, it's bad, isn't it? Nothing else matters to you but the land. *Nothing.*"

His father's hand swung up and Jeremy turned to flee. His knee banged the riser and he fell, crying out with the hot pain, sprawling on the steps at his father's feet.

All by itself, the firefly popped into the air between them, glowing like a hot coal.

With a hoarse cry, Dad flinched backward, his hand clenching into a fist, ready to smash him like he'd smashed Dan. He *was* scared. Dan was right. Jeremy stared up at his father through a blur of pain tears. "It's not *bad!*" he screamed. "It's just *me. Me!* I make things because they're pretty! Doesn't that count?" He cringed away from his father's fist.

His father hesitated, lowered his hand slowly. "No," he said in a choked voice. "It doesn't count. It doesn't count, either, that a man's just trying to stay alive. I . . . I wish it did." He stepped past Jeremy and went on up the stairs.

Jeremy listened to his slow, heavy tread on the floorboards over his head. His pulse pounded in his ears and he felt dizzy. *It doesn't count,* his father had said. *I wish it did.* Jeremy put his forehead down on his clenched fists, and his tears scalded his knuckles.

Jeremy was right. Dan was in the church basement. Yellow light glowed dimly from one of the window wells along the concrete foundation, the only light in the dark, dead town. Jeremy lay down on his stomach and peered through the glassless window. Yep. Mr. Brewster was sitting on an old pew beside a wooden door, flipping through a tattered hunting magazine by the light of a hissing gasoline lantern.

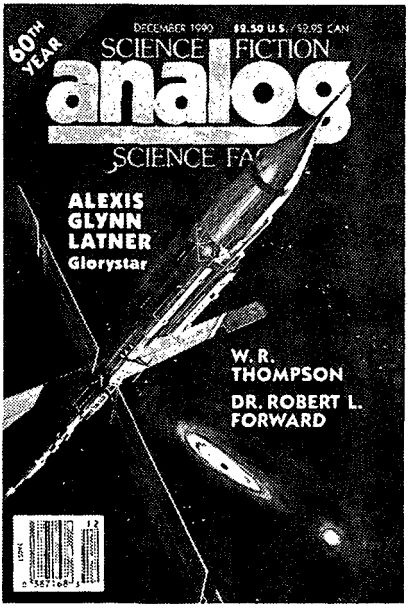
He looked wide awake.

Jeremy looked at the sky. Was it getting light? How long until dawn?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE PAST, THE PRESENT, THE FUTURE, THE UNKNOWN.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND SAVE 29% OFF THE BASIC PRICE
CALL TOLL-FREE 1-800-333-4561



YES SEND ME

☐ Please send me 18 issues for only $29.50 —save 29% off the basic price.

☐ Please send me 12 issues for only $19.97.

SCIENCE FICTION
analog
SCIENCE FACT®

Mail to: P.O. Box 7060, Red Oak, Iowa 51591

Name_____

Address_____

City_____

State_____ Zip_____

Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery of first issue. *Outside US & Poss. 12 for $25.97, 18 for $38.75.*
All foreign orders must be paid in advance in U.S. currency.

MTSA-6

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Desperate, he leaned over the cracked lip of the well. Mr. Brewster wasn't going to fall asleep. Not in time.

The firefly had scared Dad. Jeremy lay flat in the dust, face pressed against his clenched fists. Mr. Brewster didn't know about the makings, *probably* didn't, anyway. Cold balled in Jeremy's belly, so bad that he almost threw up. *Bigger* would be scarier, but bigger was harder. What if he couldn't do it?

The firefly popped into the air two feet from Mr. Brewster's magazine, big as a chicken.

"Holy shit!" Mr. Brewster's chair banged over as he scrambled to his feet. "Mother of *God,* what's *that?*" His voice sounded strange and squeaky. Nails biting his palms, Jeremy made the firefly dart at Mr. Brewster's face. It moved sluggishly, dimming to a dull orange. Oh God, don't let it fade! Sweat stung Jeremy's eyes.

Mr. Brewster yelled and threw his magazine at it. His footsteps pounded up the wooden stairs, and, a moment later, the church door thudded open. Jeremy lay flat in the dust as Mr. Brewster ran past him. The ground felt warm, as if the earth had a fever. Sweat turned the dust on Jeremy's face to mud, and he was shaking all over. He couldn't hear Mr. Brewster's footsteps any more.

Now!

He scrambled down through the window. A fragment of glass still stuck in the frame grazed his arm, and he landed on the broken chair. It collapsed with a terrible crash. Panting, Jeremy scrambled to his feet. Oh God, please don't let Mr. Brewster come back. He struggled with the bolt on the storeroom door, bruising his palm. It slid back, and he pushed the heavy door open.

Dan was sitting on the floor between shelves of musty hymnals and folded choir robes. The yellow light made his skin look tawny brown, like the dust. His face was swollen and streaked with dried blood.

"Jeremy?" Hope flared in Dan's eyes.

"Hurry." Jeremy grabbed his arm.

Dan staggered to his feet and followed Jeremy up the steps, treading on his heels. Someone shouted behind them and Jeremy's heart lurched.

"That way." He pointed.

Dan threw an arm around him and ran, half-carrying Jeremy as they ducked behind the dark Exxon station. They scrambled under the board fence in the back, lay flat while someone ran and panted past. Mr. Brewster? This was like a scary game of hide-and-seek. Gray banded the eastern horizon as Jeremy led Dan across the dusty main street, listening for footsteps, stumbling on the rough pavement. They turned left by the boarded-up restaurant, cut through a yard full of drifted dust, dead weeds, and a gasless car.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jeremy had left Ezra tethered behind the last house on the street. The pony gave a low, growling whinny as they hurried up. Dan stroked his nose to quiet him, his eyes running over the lumpy bulges of the pack.

"It's all there, food, water, and everything," Jeremy panted. "It's not a very good job—I didn't know how to fix a pack. The ground's pretty hard along the river, so you won't leave many tracks. Willow creekbed'll take you way south. It's the first creekbed past the old feed mill. You can't miss it."

"I thought you were coming with me." Dan looked down at Jeremy.

"I was." Jeremy looked at the old nylon daypack he'd left on the ground beside Ezra. It wasn't very heavy because he didn't have much. "I changed my mind."

"You can't." Dan's fingers dug into his shoulders. "They'll know you let me out. What'll happen then?"

"I don't know." Jeremy swallowed a lump of fear. His father was part of the land, linked to it. If the land dried up and died, Dad would die. "I got to stay," he whispered.

"Why? You think you'll make peace with your father?" Dan shook him—one short, sharp jerk that made Jeremy's teeth snap together. "You've got magic in your hands. Real magic. You think that's ever going to matter to *him?*"

"I don't know." Tears clogged Jeremy's nose, burned his eyes.

"Hell, my own choices haven't turned out so hot. Who am I to tell you what you should do?" Dan wiped the tears away, his fingers rough and dry on Jeremy's face. "Just don't let them kill your magic." He shook Jeremy again, gently this time. "He needs it. They *all* need it." He sighed. "And I'd better get going. Keep making things, kid." He squeezed Jeremy's shoulder hard, grabbed Ezra's lead rope, and walked away into the fading night.

Jeremy stood still, the last of his tears drying on his face, listening to Ezra's muffled hoofbeats fade in the distance. He listened until he could hear nothing but the dry whisper of the morning breeze, then he started back. He thought about cutting across the dun hills and down through the riverbed to get home. Instead, his feet carried him back into town and he let them.

They might have been waiting for him in front of the church—Mr. Brewster, Sally Brandt, Mr. Mendoza and . . . Dad. Jeremy faltered as they all turned to stare at him, wishing in one terrible, frightened instant that he had gone with Dan after all. They looked at him like they had looked at Dan yesterday, hard and cold. Mr. Brewster walked to meet him, slow and stifflegged, and Jeremy wondered suddenly if they'd hang *him* instead of Dan.

Maybe. It was there, in their faces, back behind their cold eyes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You little snot." Mr. Brewster's hand closed on Jeremy's shirt, balling up the fabric, lifting him a little off his feet. "You let Greely out! I saw you. Where's he headed?"

"I don't know," Jeremy said.

"Like *hell*." Brewster slapped him.

Red-and-black light exploded behind Jeremy's eyelids, and his mouth filled with a harsh, metallic taste. He fell, hard and hurting, onto his knees, dizzy, eyes blurred with tears, belly full of sickness.

"Knock it off, Ted."

Dad—amazingly, *Dad*—was lifting him to his feet, hands under his arms, gentle, almost.

"*I* lay hands on my kids," he said harshly. "No one else."

"He knows where that bastard's headed!" Mr. Brewster was breathing heavy and fast. "You beat it out of him or *I* do."

"He said he doesn't know. That's the end of it, you hear me?"

Jeremy breathed slow, trying not to throw up. Silence hung between the two men, heavy and hot. It made the air feel thick and hard to breathe. Dad was angry, but not at him. He was angry at Mr. Brewster. For hitting him? Jeremy held his breath, tasting blood on his swelling lip, afraid to look up.

"You talk pretty high and mighty," Mr. Brewster said softly. "Considering you had to come crawling for help last winter. Seems like you ought to shut up."

Jeremy felt his father jerk, as if Mr. Brewster had kicked him. He felt his father's arms tremble and held his breath, wondering if Dad was going to let go, turn his back and walk away.

"Seems like *we* all pitched in, when mice got into *your* seed stock a few years back," Dad said quietly.

Mr. Brewster made a small, harsh sound.

"Come *on*, Ted!" Sally's shrill exasperation shattered the tension of the moment. "While you're standing around arguing, Greely's making tracks for Boardman."

"We got to split up," Mr. Mendoza chimed in.

Legs spread, shoulders hunched, Mr. Brewster glowered at Jeremy. Abruptly, he spun on his heel. "Shit." He jerked his head at Mr. Mendoza. "I bet the bastard headed west," he snarled. "We'll go down the riverbed, cut his tracks." He stalked off down the street with Mr. Mendoza.

Sally Brandt pushed tousled hair out of her face, sighed. "I'll go wake up the Deardorfs," she said. "We'll spread north and east. You can take the south."

He felt his father's body move a little, as if he had nodded at her. Jeremy stared down at the dust between his feet, heart pounding so hard that it felt like it was going to burst through his ribs. He felt Dad's hands

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lift from his shoulders, cringed a little as his father moved around in front of him, blocking the rising sun, but all he did was lift Jeremy's chin, until he had to meet his father's eyes.

"I thought you'd gone with him," he said.

Jeremy looked at his father's weathered face. It looked like the hills, all folded into dun gullies—not angry, not sad, just old and dry.

"If we find Greely, we have to hang him," Dad said heavily. "Right or wrong, we voted—you got to know that, son."

"I was going to go." Jeremy swallowed, tasted dust. "You had to ask for food," he whispered. "Because of me."

His father's face twitched, as if something hurt him inside.

Without warning, the firefly popped into the air between them again, pale this time, a flickering shadow in the harsh morning light. Jeremy sucked in his breath, snuffed it out as his father flinched away from it.

"I'm sorry," he cried. "I didn't *mean* to make it, it just . . . happened. It makes Rita Menendez laugh." He took a deep, hurting breath. "I won't do it anymore," he whispered, struggling to get the words past the tightness in his throat. "Not ever."

"Do it again." His father's hand clamped down on Jeremy's shoulder. "Right now."

Trembling, afraid to look at his father's face, Jeremy made the firefly appear again.

His father stared at it, breathing hard. With a shudder, he thrust his fingers into the firefly, yanked his hand back as if it had burned him. "It scares me." His voice was a harsh whisper. "I don't understand it." He stared at his hand, closed his fingers slowly into a fist. "It's like this crazy drought." His voice shook. "I don't understand that, neither." He looked at Jeremy suddenly. "Not everyone's going to laugh. You scared the shit out of Ted. He ain't going to forgive you for that."

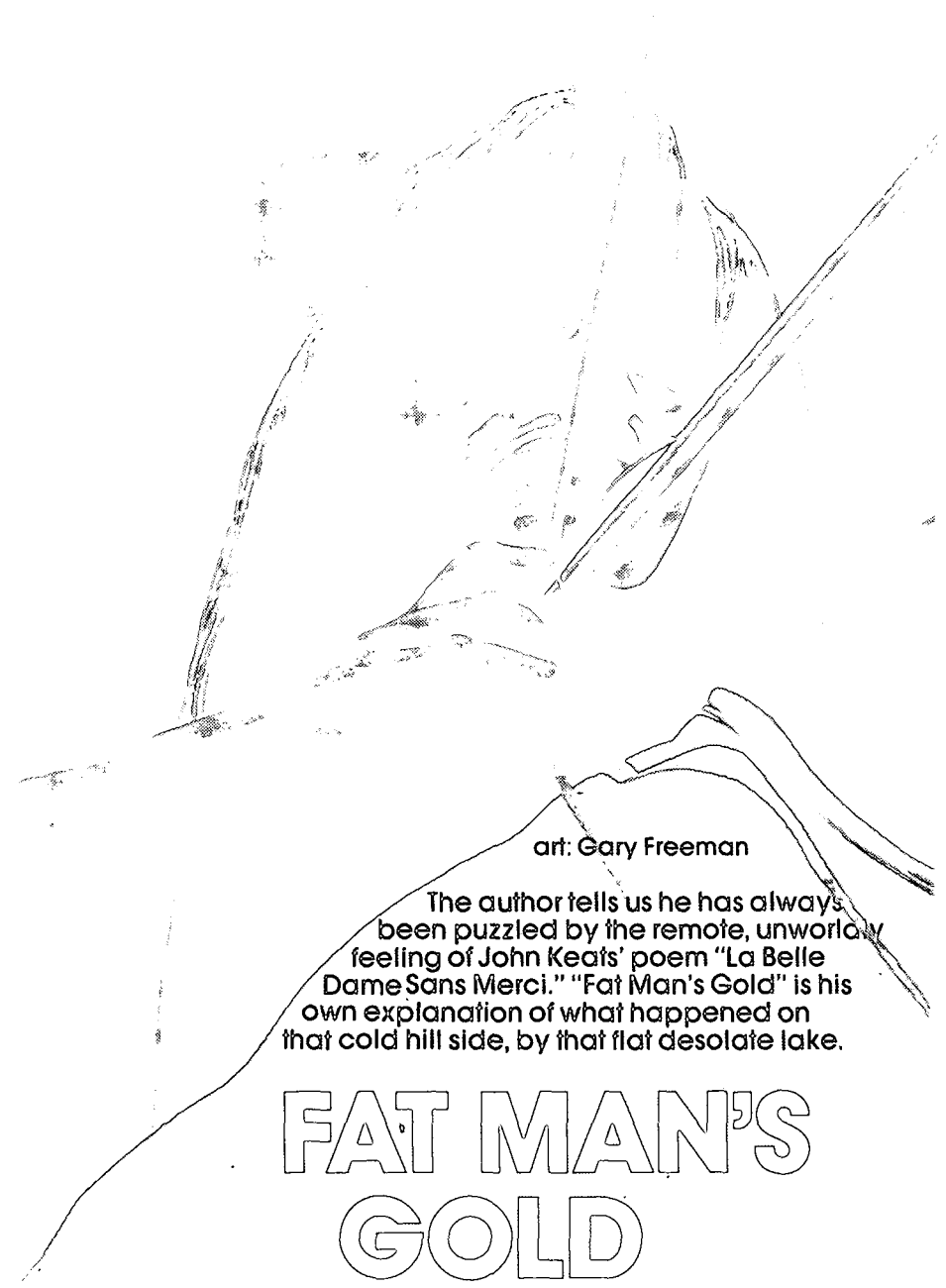
Dad talked like he could keep on making things. Jeremy sneaked a look at him, heart beating fast again, throat hurting.

"Hell," his father said softly. "I don't have any answers. Maybe there *aren't* any answers any more—no good ones, anyway." He met Jeremy's eyes. "I've got to look south for Greely," he said. "Which way do you think he headed? Down Willow creekbed—or by the main road to La Grande?"

Jeremy hesitated for a moment, then straightened his shoulders with a jerk. "I think he went down the main road," he said, and held his breath.

His father shaded his eyes, stared at the dun fold of Willow creekbed in the distance. "There aren't any good answers." He sighed and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "We'll look for Greely on the main road," he said. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



art: Gary Freeman

The author tells us he has always been puzzled by the remote, unworldly feeling of John Keats' poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." "Fat Man's Gold" is his own explanation of what happened on that cold hill side, by that flat desolate lake.

FAT MAN'S GOLD

by Charles Sheffield

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The unfamiliar sound woke him. Rob opened his eyes, and the sky above his sleeping bag became a smoky bowl of low clouds, lit by an invisible moon. Off to his left, in the direction of the great lake, the sound came again. It was a faint, high-pitched squeak of stressed fibers.

He raised his head. Tanya was on one knee at the edge of the still water, a short bow and a silver arrow in her hands. The full-drawn bow was no thicker than his finger—the size of a child's toy.

"Tanya!" He tried to cry out, but no sound came from his throat. He wanted to swing his body upright, and could not move. He watched as she sighted out across the dark inland sea, to where a tiny spark of light glittered in the distance, hundreds of yards from the shore.

She set the arrow carefully in place and pulled the bow to full draw, pointing it across the lake. The sinews of her neck and arms stood out in the gloom like white ropes. For someone of her strength, such an effort for such a bow was ludicrous, the stuff of dreams.

She released the arrow. Rob saw a streak of silver arching away offshore, on and on, impossibly fast and far. Five seconds later the distant glimmer of light was extinguished. A low, wavering whistle sounded across the lake. The dark plain of water began to dimple, froth, and fold.

Tanya threw down the bow and ran forward, hurling herself into the seething surface.

A fast-food franchise is designed to offer certain guarantees of uniformity. A Big Mac should look and taste the same, within statistical limits of error, at noon in San Diego, or at sunset in New York City, and service employees should look, sound and act as much like clones as Nature permits.

But to the connoisseur there are differences.

Over a two-year period Rob Barrett had tried all the two-dollar-and-under open-nine-o'clock-and-later fast food joints within six blocks of the front entrance of the main library, and he had been satisfied with only two of them. When the library closed at ten P.M. he walked two hundred yards Tuesday and Friday nights to a Pizza Hut (small pepperoni and large Pepsi); on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, rain or shine, he ambled three hundred yards to McDonalds (McNuggets, french fries, and coffee). Quality of food played no part in his choices. What he sought was fast service, no crowd, and a place where he could spread notes and papers on the table and review them as he ate, without management pressure to leave or other interruptions (he had dropped a decent Burger King when too-friendly employees wanted to chat about local news and local weather).

The first day of December fell on Thursday. McDonalds was busier than usual. It was ten-thirty before Rob could carry his tray to the usual

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

table, arrange his food to his precise preference, open his notebook, and take a first bite of a honey-dipped chicken nugget. As he did so his foot touched something propped against a table-leg. It fell over with a clatter onto the hard floor.

An umbrella?

Rain had been forecast for evening, but it had not materialized. It was exactly the situation where someone might leave behind protection from the elements. Rob had done it himself, in the library, and been forced to go to the Lost and Found Department the next day and argue about his forsaken property with an attendant who insisted on a unique identification for an object that to Rob had no more individual identity than an electron.

Now Rob bent sideways and reached down. His groping hand found a heavy, rough-sided cylinder, about three inches across, and lifted it sight unseen to table-top level.

He stared at it open-mouthed, waiting for the object to explain its presence. Not an umbrella. Under the table at McDonalds some diner had left an embossed leather quiver full of feathered arrows. Rob pulled out one of the shafts, tested the point on his thumb, and winced. Steel-tipped and sharp as a needle, thickening back to a broad-headed weight of metal as big around as his little finger, it was half a pound of violence, balanced, functional, and thoroughly lethal-looking. He replaced it and laid the quiver on the table next to his notebook. Who did you report this to—the restaurant manager, the Central Park Recreation Committee, or the police department?

That decision didn't have to be made. While he was still staring he heard the clatter of footsteps approaching from behind, and a hand reached over to grab at the strap on the leather case.

"Thank goodness." The voice was husky and breathless, like a three-pack-a-day smoker. "You got it. Two months' work, I thought it was gone, right there."

Rob turned, looking around and then *up,* to stare at a child's face two feet too far from the floor.

"My term project!" continued the smoky foreign voice—German? Swedish? "If I had lost, I would have been so sad."

The face descended to Rob's level, as the woman slid into the seat opposite. And it *was* a woman, no doubt about that. The figure accompanying the six-foot-plus frame was anything but childlike. It recalled to Rob the comic-book illustrations of Amazons that had fueled his earliest sexual fantasies. The bare forearm and hand that clutched the quiver had sinews like cables.

"Take care of this for me again, would you, just one more minute," she said, and hurried off.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When she returned she was carrying two small Coke cups. She placed one in front of Rob. "It is to celebrate. A happy reunion, for me and my arrows." Before he could object she took a bottle from her purse, unscrewed the top, and poured a few ounces of dark liquid into each cup. "Pusser's rum," she said. "It is one hundred proof spirit." She lifted her cup, while Rob stared at her in bemusement. "I know they say no alcohol allowed in here, hunh? Then maybe we must pretend it is Coca-Cola. If you do not tell, I will not."

She took a swig and lifted an arrow from the quiver. "Please, look at this, so beautiful. With full draw on a sixty-pound bow, it passes through a whole body, bones and all. Whoosh!" She pushed the arrow forward and gave a whistling sound.

Apparently Rob's total silence was making an impression, because she reached out a muscular right hand, gripped his, and shook it. "But what is your name?" and before he could reply, "I am Tanya Volastig. What you saved for me, it is my toxophily final. You know toxophily?"

"Ar-archery."

"A drink for you. Do you shoot for yourself?—arrows, I mean, guns they do not count." And at Rob's shake of the head, "You ought to. It would get you into the open air, and put better color in your cheeks."

How many years since he had been told that? At least fifteen, when his mother had nagged him to stop reading and go play outside. The child-woman opposite had raised her cup again, and was gazing at him over the top of it as he reached forward to close his notebook.

"I'm interrupting your work, no?" she said. "I am so sorry. But I am so pleased to have my quiver and my arrows back."

"It's—all right." To his surprise, Rob realized that it was. Tanya Volastig's intrusion and vital presence were worlds apart from the social inanities that had forced him to abandon the Burger King. Even when she turned his notebook uninvited, opened it, and leafed through to the last written page of symbols, he made no move to stop her.

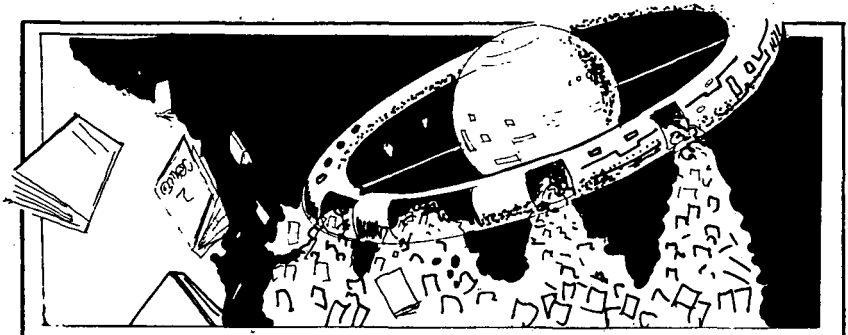
She stared for a few seconds, then slowly rolled her gaze upward without moving her head, examining the tabletop, each individual button on Rob's vest, and finally his chin, nose and eyes.

"Russian? You are a teacher?"

It was her eyes, he decided, that provided the impression of the child in a woman's body. She wasn't so young in her features and complexion, maybe twenty-three or twenty-four, but those eyes were wide spaced and sky-blue, with a look of innocence and unabashed curiosity that you didn't expect to see in anyone past five years old.

"No." It was all the explanation he needed to give, but the question in her eyes made him continue, "Not exactly a teacher. I'm with the university, but I'm a research fellow."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



WAREHOUSE SALE

Our warehouse is full—full of stellar back issues of *Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. That's why we're having our first warehouse sale. For only $9.95 plus postage and handling, we will send you an assortment of 10 classic issues of *Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact* or *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. That's less than $1.00 per issue, an unprecedented savings.

Please send your check or money order (no COD's please) to:

Warehouse Sale
Davis Publications, Inc.
P.O. Box 40
Vernon, N.J. 07462

Please send me

_____ An assortment of 10 issues of *Analog Science Fiction/Science Fact* ($9.95 plus $3.50 postage and handling).

_____ An assortment of 10 issues of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* ($9.95 plus $3.50 postage and handling).

Please send to

Name _____
(Please Print)

Address _____

City _____ St _____ Zip _____

While we cannot accommodate requests for specific issues, we guarantee that you will be delighted with your surprise assortment and will enjoy discovering new stories and authors. Also, at this great price, these back issues will make wonderful gifts for your science-fiction-loving friends.
Available in U.S. only.
All 10 issues will be delivered to you within 6 to 8 weeks. HTKC-8

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She was frowning over the ideographs. "What *is* this? I cannot read."

"Turkic and K-Kirgiz. Spoken in parts of east Asia, but it's written in Cyrillic, like Russian." As usual when he was stressed, surprised, or just excited, the irritating stammer took random charge of his voice.

"Ah. Looks *hard*. You must be smart, I think. Anyway, thank you again." She grabbed the quiver, slid to the edge of the bench seat and stood up. "I must run now, or I will again be missing my bus."

She was past him and away. He twisted in his chair and watched her hurry off, a tall, powerful woman whose black plastic raincoat streamed behind her like a magician's cloak as she ran out and across the street. Just as she reached the other side the rain started, in a sudden torrent that splashed the windows of the restaurant and made it impossible to see anything outside. Rob stared through the streaked glass, at last gave up, and turned to find every eye in the restaurant had been following her, and was now moving to stare at him.

He ducked his head to stare at the table, with its cold food, cold coffee, and untouched cup of pretend-coke. He took a sip, and grunted as the lukewarm liquid hit the back of his throat. If she could *gulp* this stuff, she was a hardcore alcoholic or she had a digestion like an ostrich. He went on sipping, turned his notebook right way round, and gazed unseeing at the notes he had written earlier in the evening. They appeared oddly unfamiliar. He hadn't asked Tanya Volastig a single thing. But now that she had gone, he wanted to throw a dozen questions at her.

The next night was Friday, and that implied the Pizza Hut. Rob broke the habit of two years and walked through continuing rain to McDonalds. He went early, and sat at his usual table. There was no logic to the idea that Tanya Volastig might come again, since in two years of meals he had never seen her there before. But when eight-thirty passed, and then nine and nine-thirty, he was filled with an odd feeling of disappointment.

At ten-fifteen he dumped his empty tray and gathered up the plastic bag that protected his notebooks. He was at the door when a voice behind him said, "Hey!"

He turned. She was there, her hair soaking wet and her grin so pleased and friendly that he had to smile back. She was wearing a dazzling knee-length coat of silver fur, opened to reveal a dress the same color as her eyes.

"I came here early—half-past six." She sounded even more breathless, like a young victim of emphysema. "But then I had to go and pick up this for tomorrow—" she waved the gunnysack she was carrying "—and it took me longer than I expected. And then I was afraid I'd miss you, and I was forced to run all the way. And still I have one more errand tonight! I can stay only one minute."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She flopped into a seat. Rob stared down at her.

"What made you think I'd be here?"

"The manager told me."

"But you didn't know my name. Nor does he."

"Ah, no. But he said, Ah, yeah, there is this big fat guy, he always sits at that table over there and stays for a long time. Anyway, I *do* know your name. It is Rob Barrett, eh? I saw it last night, written on the front of your notebook."

A big fat guy! And that must have been the way Tanya Volastig had identified him to the McDonalds' staff. The thirty pounds (no, be honest, *fifty* pounds) that he had been intending to lose for ten years hung heavier on him than ever. *Nobody wants a fat man.*

"Anyway, I just wished to come here and tell you." She was hurrying on, as though trying to rescue him from the embarrassment she herself had caused him. "My teacher, he told me this morning that my arrows are the best that he has ever for a student's work. I am going out to the field targets tomorrow, and I will try them. And I wondered, perhaps you would like to come with me—and maybe shoot some arrows for yourself?"

She seemed to be giving him credit for something he hadn't done, saving her arrows from certain loss. All he *had* done was sit at the table for two minutes, and pick up what his foot had kicked over.

"That would be great," Rob stared into those guileless and enthusiastic blue eyes and heard his own voice replying, even before he had learned where the field targets were located, even before he realized that the next morning, Saturday, he was supposed to pick up a batch of copies from the library that he had been lusting to get his hands on for weeks. He was setting himself up for ignominy, too, that was for sure—fat Robbie Barrett, the kid with the worst coordination in high-school memory, was going to shoot arrows and make an utter fool of himself. He still sweated at the memory of gym classes where he had hung inverted and helpless on beams, of ball games where he had missed pop-ups so easy that the coach told him he should have been able to catch them in his mouth. Archery sounded even worse; but he was going to do it.

"That is *wonderful,*" she was saying, and standing up again. "Where then should we meet? Do you have a car?"

"No."

"Then I must drive you. Where do you live?"

"Uptown. You'd never find it. How about the library?"

"I know it. That would be perfect. Shall we say, the main steps? At quarter past ten?"

Which would give him enough time to pick up his reprints. He nodded, and she was gone, six feet of confined energy heading for the rear entrance through which she must have entered.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But I don't know where you live, he wanted to shout after her. Suppose I'm sick or something, and I can't make it?

Except that he would make it, no matter what. Embarrassment, incompetence, ridicule from Tanya Volastig's athletic archery companions, an arrow shot through his own foot, all that made no difference. He wanted to go with her, wherever, whenever, more than he had ever wanted anything. It might end in disaster and humiliation, but that wasn't going to stop him.

The whirlpools seethed over the black lake surface, appearing and disappearing at random. Tanya was swimming toward *one of them. Rob screamed at her, waving, pointing, warning, cursing his inability to move.*

She did not seem to hear him. She swam on, and within seconds the whirlpool had her. It began to spin her around, sucking her closer and closer to the dark axis of the vortex. She was treading water and making no attempt to escape. As she came to the central funnel she somehow turned to face him.

And smiled serenely.

At last Rob could move. He stood upright and tried to run forward. His legs failed him, and he collapsed to his knees on the powdery sand.

The librarian in the reference section had Rob's reprints ready, and was all set to hold him to the usual ransom. In return for his copies—which he had to pay for, at a usurious fifty cents a page—Rob was expected to listen to endless whining about library salaries and lack of appreciation. Rob had never found a way to say no, and he had resigned himself to a lost hour every couple of weeks.

Not today, though. Rob had stayed up until after one in his apartment, then gone to bed and dreamed of Tanya Volastig, continuously and disturbingly, until four. Lacking information, he had constructed for her in his dreams a total personality, life-style, and family history. Then he had lain awake for the rest of the night, afraid that in spite of his alarm clock he would oversleep. Now he was just as afraid that she might arrive early, and leave without him. He nodded at the librarian, grabbed the pile of papers, and rushed back to the library entrance.

She was already there, parked at the steps by a "No Standing" sign in a little grey convertible with the top down despite the cold, blustery December morning. It seemed a size too small for her.

And two sizes too small for me, thought Rob as he wedged himself into the passenger seat. Damn all cars made for midgets. Before he could buckle his seat belt she was away, making an illegal U-turn to head west. She drove fast and in silence, her attention on the road. Rob had a chance to study her profile and make an assessment of his companion,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

without being blinded by those consuming eyes or distracted by the force of her conversation.

She was older than he had first thought, maybe twenty-six, with the beginning of laugh lines at the corner of her eyes. Her hair was golden-red, thick, and dead straight, blowing back in a dense horse-tail from her temples and low forehead. Her complexion was not pure Caucasian, and its darker tone combined with high cheekbones to suggest Indian or Asian blood. Her head sat on a powerful column of a neck, her arms were tanned and muscular, and she handled the car with coordination and unlimited self-confidence. No wonder the staff and customers of McDonalds had followed her every move. She must receive that kind of attention wherever she went. Maybe the way she held herself and that intensity of manner was her response to continuous head-turning. If size and appearance make it impossible to be inconspicuous, then flaunt it: *All right, little people. Feast your eyes, take a good look at somebody who makes you all feel like drab dwarves.*

They had cleared the western edge of the inner city, skimming through light traffic along roads unfamiliar to Rob and heading for the patchwork of golf courses and country clubs that lay just within the beltway; rich man's country, three-acre residential zoning that supported four-million dollar houses, private pools and tennis courts, custom-built Rolls, Mercedes, Jaguars, and Cadillacs, imported European maids (Hispanics need not apply), and poorly disguised class distinction.

Tanya Volastig drove as though she knew every short-cut and crossing street. Rob's thoughts turned from her appearance to his own. Thirty-four years old, and still, according to his father, a "student" without a "real" job. Six-one when he abandoned his slouch, and overweight despite strenuous and regular walking. No distinguishing characteristics, except a better-than-average brain, and that didn't show. No heads turned when he entered restaurants.

So what was he doing with someone as spectacular as Tanya Volastig? Inviting ultimate rejection?

He was still wondering when the car turned through a pair of open iron gates and drove along a gravel road. They were on the grounds of a private club.

Rob stared around him, intimidated by the evidence of wealth. "Are you a member here?"

"Of course not!" She stopped in an open area and jumped out. "I am too poor. The man who teaches my archery class, he arranges so we get once-a-week access. This way. The targets should already be set up, and the distance markers in position." She grabbed a long box that had been sitting diagonally across the cramped rear seat. "If you will kindly take the arrows. . . ."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He picked up the familiar quiver and followed her across a well-tended grassy area, to a series of narrow white tapes fixed to the level surface with thin iron skewers. The tapes were about ten paces apart.

"It is set up for National rounds," said Tanya. "Sixty yards maximum. That is what women usually shoot in this country. I prefer York rounds for myself, because I am better at longer distances. But there is no space, and we cannot risk hitting the golfers. Their course goes past that way."

Rob followed her pointing arm. Off in the middle distance were two round targets, their lower edges a couple of feet off the ground. He squinted at them.

"They look awfully small. Are you supposed to hit them from here?"

"Here, and also ten yards farther back. We are at the fifty-yard tape. And one is not just supposed to *hit* the targets. Do you see the colored rings on them?"

"Uh-uh." Rob did. Just. He added growing nearsightedness to his list of athletic handicaps.

"There are four of them. Each one is about five inches wide, with the ten-inch bulls-eye in the middle. If you put an arrow in the outside ring, the white one, you get one point. The black ring is three, the blue, five, the red, seven, and if you hit the bulls-eye—the gold, it is called—you will get nine points."

She had taken a horn-tipped bow from its carrying case as she spoke, and was bending it to place the bowstring in the two grooved nocks that held it at either end of the bow. "It would please me, Rob, if you were to try first. Let us see what you will get."

Rob shook his head. "A golfer, with my luck. You go ahead, I wouldn't know where to start."

"Oh, no. Everyone in America has seen Robin Hood movies. Just do what he does."

"I'm more the Friar Tuck type. Where's everybody else—the other archers?"

"There is no one else." She picked an arrow from the quiver and examined the feathered end. "I thought that you might prefer the two of us only, for your first time."

So she realized that not everyone had her self-confidence.

"Here," she went on. "Permit me to show you. You are left-handed, are you not?" She saw his surprise. "I knew from your writing, it is typical, what do you call it, *lefty*. So we will do everything lefty." She placed the bow in his right hand. "You hold it by the grip, so, this way up."

It was a six-foot length of smooth, fine-grained wood, stained to a uniform black. Rob raised and lowered it a couple of times.

"It's *heavy*."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Indeed. It is *Toxylon pomiferum*—Osage orange. You can buy bows of metal or fiberglass these days, they shoot farther and do not need to be restrung every time. But I am a traditionalist. I prefer this and western yew. Now, please turn at right angles to the target. And do not *slouch!*"

She came to stand behind him and reached around, gripping him at the waist to adjust his stance. Rob stood up straight and looked down. She was wearing pleated buff slacks, and the tan walking shoes below them had no more than one-inch heels. But she could lean her head over his shoulder with ease. Her breasts were against his shoulder blades. He revised his estimate of her height—upward. She was an inch or more taller than he was. A faint and flowery perfume filled his nostrils.

"Now you must take the arrow like this." She demonstrated calmly, as though unaware of her effect on him. "You hold it in your left hand, and you put the groove at the feathered end—it is called the nock—onto the bowstring, next to this bone inset. That is the arrow plate. And now you must pull back, smooth and firm, like this, to bend the bow. You put your first three fingers onto the string, and you hold the arrow between your first and second finger. Most people use an arm guard and a shooting glove, but I do not like either one. Watch me now."

She took the bow and arrow from him. The draw of the bow looked absolutely effortless as she flexed it, but Rob saw the sinews jump out sharply on her bare forearms.

She did it half a dozen times, pulling the arrow all the way back, and then allowing it to move forward again without releasing it. Finally she handed arrow and bow to Rob.

"Now, if you please, you must try, just to get the feel of it."

He imitated her action, and was amazed at how difficult it was to bend the bow. When he approached full draw, he could feel all his muscles quivering. It seemed impossible to aim accurately at anything, with his arms under so much strain.

"Sixty pounds tension." She had read his face. "If you were really ready to shoot now you would aim at the target, a little high to allow for gravity, keep pulling back, and then slide your fingers off the string. *Do not let go of it.*"

Rob hadn't meant to. His grip had slipped, and he didn't even see the arrow in its first twenty yards of flight. When he caught sight of it, it was halfway to the target and following an oddly wobbling and curved trajectory. At his side, Tanya Volastig was producing an odd, wavering whistle as she tracked the arrow's motion. Rob watched in disbelief as it soared on and smacked cleanly into the face of the painted circle.

Tanya stopped whistling. She said, "Do you know, I believe that you may have—" and went running forward.

Rob stared at the bow he was holding, and slowly followed. The arrow

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was squarely in the four-foot target. More than that, it was in the bulls-eye.

Rob had hit the gold from fifty-five yards, with his first arrow.

When he came close enough, Rob saw that his shot had done more than nick the bulls-eye. It had found the exact geometrical center of the golden circle. After that, anything seemed possible.

Tanya readily accepted his refusal to shoot again. "You are like a golfer, who does the hole in one on the first time that he picks up a club. Where is there to go after that but down? Let us now see how I do."

She had done miserably, far below her usual form and unable to make anything like a decent score. But she was unconcerned, and she insisted on a celebratory meal for Rob's feat after her own target practice was over; following the drive back to town and a long, late lunch at which Rob ate a great deal and Tanya ate almost nothing, the move to his apartment seemed perfectly natural.

"Nice, and neat," she said, wandering around and inspecting the photographs that covered every wall.

"Yeah." Should he tell her? "It ought to be neat, I stayed up half last night cleaning it. I don't know why, I had no idea we might finish up here."

"No?" She was studying a photograph of a mountain lake, its dark waters desolate and mysterious. "I did."

He was on the opposite side of the living room, awkwardly keeping clear of her, but now she marched over to stand in front of him. "And I *hoped* we would finish here, when I picked you up this morning." Her face was inches away from his, the wide blue eyes uncompromising. "Come on, Rob Barrett, we have been devouring each other all the way through lunch. I know I am a big woman, and I do not expect you to pick me up and carry me off to your bed. But do not make *me* carry *you.*"

You're doing exactly that, thought Rob, as her arms went around him and her lips—Burgundy color, Burgundy taste—met his. *I know you are, because there's no way on earth I'd have the nerve to make a pass at a gorgeous woman like you. What can you possibly see in me?*

And later, during love-making that turned Rob's previous experiences into pale and pitiful memories: *Where did you learn to hold and move and grip like this? I don't know. I never want to find out.*

Astride him, Tanya had begun to gasp and move vigorously. Her china-doll blue eyes closed. In a few moments she threw back her head and the long muscles of her thighs flexed and hardened in his hands. "Ah, Rob, that is it. Right *there.* Do not stop. Ohh! There. It is *there.*" She shivered and tensed. Her whole body locked motionless for half a minute. Finally she sighed, and a quivering laugh tightened the bands of muscle in her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lower belly. "You found my center, a spot I did not know was there. You are wonderful, Rob. Two golds—two golds for you in one day."

She collapsed forward, to lie on his chest with her face in the sweaty hollow of his neck.

Two golds. Rob opened his eyes and stared at nothing. Two golds, and of the two, this one was by far the less probable. This sort of thing didn't happen to him . . . not even in his dreams.

At nine o'clock Rob returned to the apartment with the carry-out food he had ordered. He found Tanya wandering the living room in his white terrycloth robe like a tall and exotic ghost. She was holding a glass containing a couple of inches of tawny liquid.

"Rob, I have been looking at your books and papers. Permit me to ask a stupid question. What is it that you *do?"*

He carried the food cartons into the kitchen and set them down on the table. "I believe I'm the recognized world expert on a place that hardly anybody in this country knows or cares about," he said over his shoulder. "Did you ever hear of Kirgiziya? It's part of the Soviet Union now," he went on, "and has been for sixty years. Before that it was part of Russian Turkistan. I won't annoy you by asking if you know where *that* is."

He came back into the living room and led her to a wall map. "Here we are. In south-east Russia, bordering what used to be Sinkiang and is now western China. It's a beautiful place."

"You have been there?"

"Ten times. I went regularly, until this year's unrest. Mostly to here." He placed his finger on a lake shaped like a deep, broad-lipped bowl. "It has a thousand years of history, but today it's the middle of nowhere. One of the least developed parts of the world."

She put her finger next to his, tracing the outline of the body of water. "Issyk Kul?" she read.

"Yeah. 'Warm Sea,' in the Kirzig language. It's called that because it never freezes, unlike every other lake in the area. No one knows why. It *is* a sea, too, a hundred and twenty miles long, thirty miles across, half a mile deep."

"It sounds fascinating." She sounded, to Rob's surprise, as though she meant it. "But can I ask another stupid question? How did you, living here so quiet in middle America, come to be an expert on such a place, so far away?"

"It shows, doesn't it?" Rob stared ruefully down at his paunch. "You'll never believe this, but when I was a kid I wanted to be a world-famous explorer. One day I read about a Russian, Nicolai Przhevalsky. A hundred years ago he crossed the world's worst desert, here—" he placed his hand on the map, well to the south of the lake "—the *Takla Makan* desert. He

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

went on, over the *Tien Shan* mountains—the Celestial Mountains—and finally died *there,* on the shores of Issyk Kul. Ever after that, I wanted to see the place for myself. When I finished college, I finally had the chance to do it."

"But you do not go there any more?" She followed him as he turned and went back into the kitchen. As she poured herself another drink he noticed that a bottle of bourbon, unopened that morning, was almost empty—and he had not taken a drop. That was in addition to her three martinis and a bottle of wine with lunch. He would have been flat on his back, but she seemed unaffected by the alcohol.

"Well, I would go again," he said, spooning out Hunan beef, snow peas, and rice onto two plates. "I'd go in a flash if I could wangle a permit. But there's been a civil war in Kirgiziya for over a year, and most people can't get permission to go anywhere near there. Travel is really tight."

"But you are *not* just 'most people'! I looked at the papers on your desk. You wrote over half of them yourself, and every other writer cites you in their references. You say it yourself, you are the world's *expert* on that place. All you would need to do is show the Russian Embassy in Washington your credentials. I am sure that they still issue visas and permits to scholars."

"They do." He noticed that she was still drinking, but she had only toyed with her food. "Tanya, I'm not good with bureaucrats. I bring out the worst in them, they always like to give me the run-around. I'm not ready for the hassle."

"But you would really like to go?" She had laid down her fork.

"Of course I would."

"Then let me try." She came around the table and stood behind him, massaging his neck and shoulder muscles. "Let me, Rob, please. I am so good with officials. Let me take your papers to Washington, and let me get you a travel permit for a Christmas present."

She could do it. Rob was convinced that she could. He had a vision of her at the Russian Embassy, the attachés falling over themselves to serve her.

"Tanya, you're wonderful. But I can't let you do all that work, just for me."

"Ah. Not just for you." She leaned forward to nibble his ear, and her warm, liquored breath was on his face and neck. "For me, too. I will be your faithful assistant, and we will go together to the end of the world. You have me now, Rob. You will find it hard to get rid of me."

Rob balanced on a tuft of grass at the summit of a weathered hill and gazed east.

Journey's end: he stood high above the western shore of Issyk Kul,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where the brackish waters of the great lake rippled far below him under the force of a strong south wind. His message already sat in the wooden barrel on its cairn of stones, announcing that The Stammerer had returned.

It was the afternoon of March 25. Tanya had been a little optimistic. Even with Rob's credentials and the record of his former visits in hand, six weeks work had been needed before she could coax visas and travel permits from the Russian Embassy. To give her credit, most of the delay had come from the Soviet Union, where the far-off officials could not be directly exposed to Tanya's charm and forcefulness. The ones in the Embassy had fallen at her feet.

Rob pulled his hood tighter about his head. And who could blame them? In the past three months he had become used to the expressions on the faces of other men as Tanya walked at his side; the looks of lust, of admiration, of envy, of frank bewilderment. *What does a slob like that have going for him to attract such a woman, one who can have any man she chooses?*

Rob had posed the same question to himself a thousand times, late at night when she was sleeping and he could not. He had lain beside her, marveling at the strength and richness of her body, the plush curves and soft skin, the muscles and tendons that could jump into delineation like a professional body-builder's, yet remain so totally feminine, and he had wondered. What *did* she see in him?

He had asked Tanya. She had said simply. "I need you. You are right for me."

And her actions supported her words. She made love to him, fed him, comforted him, and took care of him, including making all the travel arrangements that he so detested and did so badly.

She had taken an interest in his work, too, beyond anything he had reason to expect. One of the favors that Rob had wangled from the library was a list of people who borrowed reference texts about Kirgiziya or Issyk Kul. He liked to know of anyone in the area who might share his passion. On the latest list, he had been delighted to see the name *Tanya Volastig,* in her neat and tiny handwriting. (Rob stuck the paper in his bag without examining its dates. Had he done so he would have seen that Tanya's first sign-in was in early October, two months *before* they met; and everything would have changed.)

On only one thing did she go against his wishes. She continued to drink hard liquor, more than Rob would have believed possible for man or woman. He had never seen her drunk, never noticed a telltale slurring of speech, muddled thoughts, or unsteadiness in her walk, but he knew it had to be doing terrible things to that wonderful body; all the worse, because she ate so little. No amount of coaxing and no epicurean dish

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could persuade her to take more than a mouthful or two of any meal, but she had astonished the Russians, formidable imbibers themselves, at her capacity for alcohol. In Moscow, waiting for Intourist air connections to Aktyubinsk and on to their final destination of Frunze, she had gone vodka-for-vodka until everyone else was under the table, and then continued drinking alone until the bottles were empty. He had told her the next morning that she drank too much. That he was worried about her. She had given him a grin fierce enough to melt flesh from bone, kissed him, and said she felt just fine. She looked it, too, clear-eyed and full of bursting energy.

Well, the drinking problem should be less here. The three Soviet officials who had accompanied them from Moscow had zero interest in the wilderness of Issyk Kul. They had decided to stay in Frunze, and let Rob and Tanya travel to the lake without them.

Those three men had been Tanya's main source of liquor. Without them, strong spirits would be hard to come by at Issyk Kul. The only ready supply so early in the year was at the port of Przhevalsk, a hundred miles away at the other end of the lake, where a lethal brew was distilled from fermented honey. Rob did not intend to go there.

He squinted south into the sun and wind, and decided that the delay in getting permits for their trip had been a blessing. The great "Warm Sea" stood more than a mile above sea level, and even with the recent arrival of spring and the tempering influence of the warmer waters of Issyk Kul, the continental change from winter to summer had yet to make itself felt. The air temperature hovered near freezing, snow clung stubbornly to the lower slopes of the *Terskey Alatau*—the Mottled Mountains—to the southeast, and the nomadic herdsmen had not yet left the valleys to seek the high meadows. A month ago this spot would have been truly bitter, freezing breath on whiskers and hood. By late April the sparsely scattered wild walnut, plums, pears, apples and apricots would have blossomed and set their fruit. One month more, and the hillsides would be alive with purple and yellow gorse, fragrant wildflowers, and questing honeybees. But today it was just a little too cold to stand long in one place, no matter how breathtaking the view, and the sun was sliding toward the mountain tops.

Rob glanced again at the trail, where his note sat in the message barrel. After their arrival he had at once climbed high above the lake, so that the first herdsmen leaving the valleys to inspect the high meadows would know of the return of the Stammerer (their name for him, when he had first struggled with sentence structure and accent in their local dialect).

He *wanted* them to know that he was here. Their mockery had changed to affection on his third or fourth visit, and since then all the herdsmen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had tried without success to interest him in the Kirgiz women, praising their beauty and his bulk, telling him that he would sire fine sons and daughters. He wanted to see them all again; more than that, he wanted *them* to see Tanya.

Had he brought her all the way for this, then, just to show her off? And if so, just who was he showing off? She had told him that she was from Estonia, but she never said a word about her family, or her background, or her friends. He had never been to her apartment. Her telephone number was that of an answering service. She had an uncanny skill in diverting every question about her life before she met Rob, or what she did with her time when she was not with him. His friends the herdsmen were the nosiest people in the world. They would ask him a million questions about Tanya, and he wouldn't be able to answer any of them.

His friends.

Rob caught the irony in his thought. In his own way he was as bad as Tanya. At home in America he had family and acquaintances enough, but no real friends. His friends were *here.* True, he had wanted Tanya to fly west and meet his mother and father, but it never happened. She had been oddly reluctant. "When we get back," she had said. "There will be plenty of time then. I want to be able to say that we have known each other at least half a year, so that your parents will know I am not just flirting and flitting through your life."

Tanya wasn't flitting through his life. More than friends, more than family, she *was* his life. The time was overdue for him to find out more about her, and the herdsmen's questions would be a good way to do it.

He turned, and headed back to camp. He had said he would be back in half an hour or so, but he had been walking, staring, and musing far longer than that.

There was no sign of her around the camp. He was not worried. The wild boars and tigers who had once haunted the sandy marshes at water's edge were long gone. The biggest wild animals today were the antelopes, marmots, and an occasional *mouflon,* the small sheep of the region. The herdsmen were friendly, the weather cold but not threatening, and sunset was an hour or more away.

He wandered down the strip of spongy turf that led to the shore of Issyk Kul itself, and found Tanya sitting on a rock. She was gazing through his binoculars at the dark waters. Ever since they had boarded the aircraft at New York, for a nonstop flight to Moscow, she had been filled with open excitement. The closer they came to their destination, the higher had been her spirits. But now her body language suggested someone pensive, even someone—unthinkable for Tanya—quietly sad.

"You won't find much out there," said Rob softly. He came behind her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and placed his hands on her shoulders. "The lake steamer doesn't run at this time of year, and the carp fishers are a long way east."

He leaned over her, but the setting sun was behind them and he could not see her face as she lowered the binoculars.

"I no longer need to find anything," she said. She did not turn to face him. "This is enough." She waved her hand at the desolate beach and the wind-ruffled surface of Issyk Kul. "Rob, can I ask you a favor? Can we move the camp here, nearer the water?"

He nodded, hardly noticing what she had asked. He had been struck by thoughts enough to make him as pensive as she seemed. Was this her *natural* mood? Was continuous consumption of alcohol needed to elevate her spirits? Was that why he was suddenly afraid for Tanya?

Later, when the tent had been moved to a dry area only thirty yards from water's edge, and the south wind had died to a total calm, Tanya made another request.

"Rob." Her quiet mood had persisted. "I do not want to be inside tonight. Please, let us sleep on the beach."

"It will get cold."

"We will be warm . . . if we snuggle up." She moved the double sleeping bag into the open, sat down on it, rolled her head back on her neck, and flexed her shoulders.

"What about dinner?" He had learned Tanya's body language.

"Later. Don't we want to celebrate our arrival?"

It was dark when they lay down, with a thin overcast cloud layer and a half-moon that could barely be seen through it. Making love to Tanya within the quilted comfort of the sleeping bag, Rob could *feel* rather than see the warmth of her smile.

"We are here, Rob," she whispered, as their bare bodies moved hard together. She nipped his neck with her teeth, enough to hurt. "We did it." And then, much later, as they lay snuggled side by side, "Oh, my dear, dear, Rob. This is so wonderful. Thank you for bringing me here. Do not forget me. Ever."

He was half-asleep, too far gone to register the strangeness of her last words. He grunted, and rubbed at the sore spot on his neck where her love-bite was stinging like a tiny burn. She had begun to hum to herself, her fingers stroking his chest as gently as a moth's wing, soothing him to sleep.

When he awoke she was no longer at his side. He grunted complainingly, but his limbs were heavy and his head was filled with a strange lassitude. He could hear her rummaging around in the tent a few steps away. He wanted to tell her to forget about dinner, to point out that she was never hungry and he was too tired now. Before the words could form

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

within his mind he was floating away from his body, ballooning upward and outward, soaring until the sandy beach dwindled to a thin line beneath him and the whole expanse of the lake had unfolded to his view. The shape of Issyk Kul was picked out by a million tiny points of light, glinting at water-level. What could they be? He stared down, and the world reeled and rotated about him. Lake became sky, black void populated by an infinite sea of stars.

He drifted *upward* into that emptiness, and found himself back on the lake shore. He saw Tanya. She had emerged from the tent, and was carrying a round metal cylinder about three feet long. As he re-entered his body she walked over to stand by the sleeping bag.

She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. She was smiling, but he felt tears dripping onto his forehead and saw dark hollows in place of glowing eyes.

"Do not be angry with me, Rob, when I am gone. I *have* to go home. I cannot eat your food, it is slow poison to me. I should have returned long since, but the familiar ways have closed. This place is my only hope. Please try to understand . . . and forgive."

She touched his eyelids. A needle of knowledge stabbed into his brain, and the urge to sleep again became overwhelming. Her last words came from far away: "I love you, Rob. If we never meet again, do not ever forget how special you are to me."

Rob slept. . . .

. . . and woke, after infinite years of empty-minded slumber. He opened weary eyes.

Tanya had removed from the round cylinder a small, strung bow and a miniature arrow. As he watched, still unable to move, she knelt at the water's edge and bent the taut arc of the bow to full draw. The nock of the silver arrow sat steady on the quivering string. Far off, a point of light sparkled on the silent surface of the lake.

She sighted carefully and released the arrow, whistling as it went. A streak of silver arched toward its target, impossibly fast and far. After five breathless seconds the glimmer of light was suddenly extinguished. An answering, wavering whistle sounded across the lake, and the dark plain of water began to dimple, froth, and fold into a myriad distinct whirlpools. Tanya threw down the bow and ran forward, splashing into the seething surface and heading straight for the nearest vortex.

It was a couple of hundred yards away. She swam for it hard and single-mindedly, ignoring Rob's cries. When she reached the central funnel of swirling water, the surface of Issyk Kul began to change again. All the other disturbances smoothed away to nothing, while the conical swirl of water around Tanya bulged to form a broad up-reaching lip, a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tulip glass of spinning fluid that lengthened, stretched, narrowed and finally pinched off at the top into a sharp-ended ellipsoid, like a long teardrop of streaked glass. Tanya was visible inside, totally enclosed. She started to turn, too, speeding up until her pale face and dark hair lost identity and became a single spinning blur of grey.

Faster. And faster yet.

The inside of the rotating fluid bubble was a shimmering cloud of darkness, harder and harder to see, midnight streaked with random points of light. Rob stood up, tottered, and fell back to his knees. As he touched the damp earth the spinning bubble on the lake vibrated and flickered. Before his eyes it vanished with Tanya inside it. Rob dragged himself down the sandy beach. At last he found himself on his knees in a few inches of cold water, staring across a surface calm as a duck-pond.

"Tanya!" His call echoed into the darkness, the first cry of a man who knows he has lost everything, but does not yet know how or why. Then as the buried knowledge began to bleed upward from the depths of his brain, he turned, crawled ashore, and lay face-down on the cold sand.

The five nomad herdsmen had found Stammerer's message late the previous day. They arrived at his camp close to noon, plodding through a heavy snow whose huge, half-melted flakes clumped thick on hair and beards.

He had seen them coming from far off. Strong tea was brewing on the little stove, bowls of white sugar cubes had been set out ready. He greeted them calmly, as fat and friendly as ever. But he was clearly very tired, and the manner of his speech remained oddly formal.

He shook his head at their polite inquiry. "She was here, but she was forced to leave before you could meet her. She had no choice. She was different, she could not stay in this place. She was sick, and there was trouble in her own world."

Then perhaps the next time he came, she would come with him? One of them began to ask that question, but stopped at the agonized expression on the other man's face.

I need your help, said the Stammerer. They nodded. He sat them down in a row before him, and began to talk. He lectured patiently, lengthily, and incomprehensibly, while the wind rose, snowflakes fell harder, and the lake shore became coated with slushy ice. He spoke to them, and at the same time he spoke *past* them.

Although the other access points are closed, they surely will not remain closed. They must have been open once, since she was able to arrive, and when once the trouble is over, whatever it may be, they will open again. And even without them, this one was still open as recently as yesterday. But where is it now, and how can we use it? I do not know.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rob pointed to the dark vastness of Issyk Kul, but he held his listeners with pale, exhausted eyes.

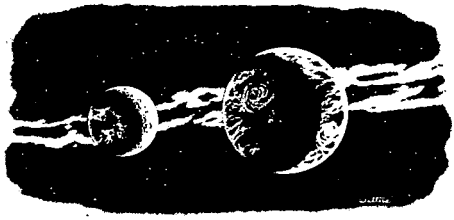
First we have to find it. We will all help in the search. Then it will be a matter of learning the access method. If a man is determined enough, he will find a way to accomplish that. I am determined enough. Rob brandished the little bow. *Here is one of the keys.*

They stared at it curiously. They knew it was no more than a toy, a thing that he had surely brought with him to give to one of the children. What was he proposing to do with it?

When Rob finished it was close to nightfall. The snow had ended. The herdsmen bade polite goodbyes and headed east into the dusk, back to the winter settlement in the valley.

They talked together as they went. They would certainly help him, for the Stammerer was their friend, and now he surely needed help. But perhaps nothing could be done. Each man had seen the shadow on the face. And although no man said it, each knew that the Stammerer was no longer a possible suitor for sisters or daughters.

He was already taken. Some other bride had spoken for him. She held strong arms about him, and it was still too soon to know if he would ever escape, or if she would one day return to claim him. ●



Set Your Computer on Warp Speed . . .

and ZAP yourself over to a online service that offers you an up-to-date encyclopedia, software downloading, games and entertainment, airline reservations, and new friends from across the country. If you own a Commodore®, IBM®-compatible, Apple® II, or Macintosh® computer, we'll get you started for FREE. Give us a call right now: **1-800-545-5047, ext. 5158**

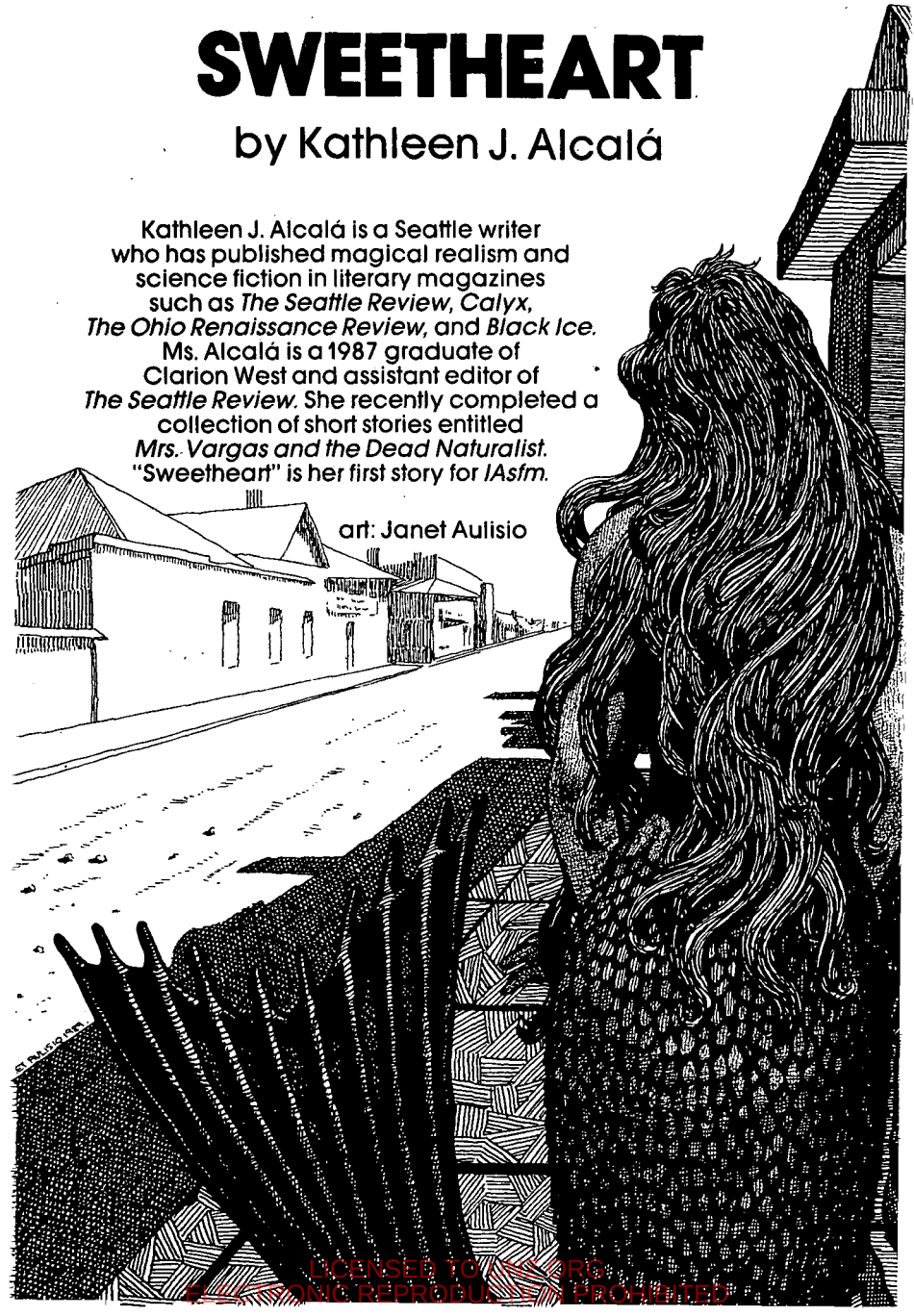
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SWEETHEART

by Kathleen J. Alcalá

Kathleen J. Alcalá is a Seattle writer who has published magical realism and science fiction in literary magazines such as *The Seattle Review, Calyx, The Ohio Renaissance Review,* and *Black Ice.* Ms. Alcalá is a 1987 graduate of Clarion West and assistant editor of *The Seattle Review.* She recently completed a collection of short stories entitled *Mrs. Vargas and the Dead Naturalist.* "Sweetheart" is her first story for *IAsfm.*

art: Janet Aulisio



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When people noticed Corazón, it was to say "She certainly doesn't resemble her sister."

Corazón was tall and shy. At seventeen, she had never had a boyfriend, and felt that her overly romantic name, which meant "sweetheart," mocked her. With her height and frizzy hair, Corazón looked like a dark candle standing at the back of her senior class picture, her mournful gaze lost in the reflection off of her glasses.

Corazón's younger sister was named Isabella, called Queenie. Where Corazón was shy, Queenie could captivate a group with her quick wit and flirtatious personality. If Queenie could have helped it, no one in San Antonio would have known that they were sisters at all.

Corazón worked in a place called Dixie's Burgers. When she graduated from school, no one asked if she had any further plans. Each day she walked to work with the hot Texas sky pressed down upon her, and tied on a butterscotch-colored apron before taking her place behind the counter.

That was the summer that Arturo and Tonia's son came home on leave. Art Junior served in the Merchant Marine. Although he was short like his father, his life at sea gave him a self-confidence no job in San Antonio could have offered. Soon he had a following of neighborhood boys who gathered every time he stopped to tell one of his stories.

Art had been to Hong Kong and India, to the Philippines and Singapore, everywhere a ship could travel, and as he told about meeting Russian sailors and Japanese fishermen, he would hold his audience rapt with his level gray gaze. Even Corazón would pause while cleaning the counter as Art talked and the flies buzzed and steam condensed around the fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

"So then this good-looking Jap girl comes out and bows to you. She's wearing this kimono and these sandals that make it so she can hardly walk. You bow, and she hands you a flower. A girl gives a guy a flower. Then everyone bows again and sits on the floor and she serves you tea. That's all there is to it."

Corazón thought about the tea ceremony for a long time afterward. That night, she imagined herself handing a perfect flower, a chrysanthemum, to a man. She could not see his face, but he had fine, artistic hands. "Thank you," he said, and she fell asleep.

When Art came into Dixie's Burgers to tell his stories, Corazón tried to creep closer without being seen so that she could hear. Not that he would have noticed. Every girl in the neighborhood was trying to get his attention, but Art and Queenie hit it off right away. Although her parents thought she was too young to have a *novio,* Queenie and Art spent a lot of time together, hanging around Dixie's and the riverfront.

Art mostly told stories about the good times he and his buddies had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in different ports, but sometimes he talked about how hard life at sea was, and the mysterious things that could happen there. Corazón began to imagine herself as an invisible passenger on a ship like his, the *U.S.S. Adventurer,* free to move about the decks, walkways and passages without being observed, watching the sailors do their jobs, and visiting strange and exotic ports with them.

After each time that Art came into Dixie's and told a story, Corazón would repeat it to herself while falling asleep that night. She could almost feel the gentle rise and fall of the ship under her as she dozed off. After a while, she was keeping an invisible journal and sending postcards to invisible relatives. She imagined herself dressed in a long, pale pink coat with a large-brimmed hat and a long trailing scarf around her neck. Coorazón practiced to give her handwriting just the right flourish.

> My dearest Hermalinda,
> The weather is lovely in Kuala Lumpur. The monsoons have not yet begun, but the orchid forests are in full bloom. I do hope little Josie is over the chicken pox.
>
> Yours faithfully,
> Corazón

Art told a story about stopping in the Aleutian Islands, and Corazón stood on the deck in a fur wrap as the ship glided past huge, unfathomably blue glaciers. Eskimos came out to greet them in kayaks.

Later, after traveling through perilous seas, the ship docked briefly in Hawaii, and Corazón waved a fond farewell as the perfume from the many leis around her neck filled the air around her.

> My Dear Tia Rosauria, (she wrote)
> The Pacific seas are endlessly blue. Dolphins follow us for miles, as though fascinated by this huge, floating city. We are headed for the South Pacific, where palm trees sway in balmy breezes. Sorry to miss the garden party this year. Please convey my regrets to Uncle.
>
> Fondly,
> Corazón

Corazón's ship-going alter-ego had by now abandoned her flowing pink coat for the more practical bell-bottoms of the sailors, and even enjoyed their singing in the evenings. She wore a navy peacoat against the evening chill, and read her mail as eagerly as the young men who suffered from being so far from home. Sometimes she had a fiancé who played polo for Argentina, but when she tired of his endless chatter about horses,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Corazón fancied a minor count in a small European country. They both remained vague, distant figures, and Corazón felt no compulsion to cut her voyage short and return to either of them. As she scrubbed down the metal counters at Dixie's, or sprayed stain-remover on her greasy uniform before washing it, Corazón composed letters in her head to her two beaus, scarcely noticing the heat and grime that were a constant part of her life.

By early August, Art's leave was almost over. He and Queenie seemed to slip away more and more often, and Corazón suspected that her sister was sneaking out at night to see him. His appearances at Dixie's were less frequent, but his stories seemed to be taking a more fantastic turn. Corazón suspected that he had run out of real stories, and was starting to make things up just to please the hungry faces around him. She didn't mind. The more exotic his voyages, the more wonderful her own.

One especially oppressive afternoon, when the dogs lay in the dust in any patch of shade, and the little old ladies didn't even bother to move their chairs outside, Art swung into Dixie's for a cold beer. He seemed unusually pensive, and took a plastic straw out of the dispenser to chew on. Five neighborhood boys soon filled the tables around him.

"Tell us about monsters," said Jorge. "Didn't you see any monsters out there?"

Art thought about this as he sprawled in his chair. "Yeah," he said, "I seen some pretty strange things. Not monsters, exactly. More like weird fish. Though not really fish." His eyes narrowed as he thought. "I guess they was mermaids."

A general sound of disbelief rose from the group.

"Aw, c'mon," said Jorge. "You didn't see no mermaids. There's no such thing!"

"Well," said Art. "I'll tell you exactly what happened, and you can make up your own minds. I'm not saying I did, and I'm not saying I didn't, but something strange was going on out there. I'm not the only one who saw it. A bunch of the guys did."

Corazón moved down the counter in order to hear better.

"We was way down in the Indian Ocean, near a bunch of islands called the Maldives. We was a little off course, though the navigator wouldn't admit it until we came right up to these islands he didn't know was there."

Art squirmed down in his seat as he talked, and seemed to be in a more serious mood than usual. His audience waited quietly, sipping their Cokes and wiping their sweaty hands on their jeans.

"There are coral reefs out there, so we decided to stop until we could figure out where we was. We dropped anchor in a bay between two

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

islands, and you could hear the howler monkeys calling back and forth between the trees. The water was dead calm, and you could see clear to the bottom. We was all out on deck smoking and stuff, but outside of the howlers, it was real quiet, kind of eerie.

"Jim, Slim Jim, we call him, was bragging about his girlfriend, who's an Olympic swimmer or something, when one of the guys points in the water and says, 'Hey Jim, there goes your girlfriend now!' We all started laughing, figuring it was some fat porpoise or even a cowfish, these really ugly things, but it was something I'd never seen before, real human-like. It was circling the ship about a hundred yards away, and the light was getting dim, so it was hard to see. Kind of brown and shiny. We'd about decided it was a big sand shark, or some other reef fish, when there's this sharp whistle from near one of the islands. This thing we'd been watching raises up out of the water and lets out a really sharp whistle in return, like an answer. It looked just like a woman when it did that, with long hair and big boobs and everything."

Art sounded so serious at this point, that the boys didn't even snicker. Corazón stood transfixed at the counter, not even pretending not to listen.

"Well, after that," said Art, still chewing on the straw, "We got out a spotlight and tried to see it better, but by then it was gone. The sun had gone down, and the captain refused permission for a small boat to go out. All we could do was wonder what the hell it was all about."

"The next day, we got our bearings and headed up to Sri Lanka. We had been south of where we were supposed to be, and the captain was pretty pissed. Anyway, we got an afternoon's leave in Sri Lanka, which is on a big island near India, and some of us got to talking to some shipping clerks who spoke English. We described what we'd seen the night before. One of the Sri Lankans said there was legends about warrior mermaids in those waters. He said there are abandoned temples, and the mermaids are guardian spirits. They kill men who try to go ashore. The other Sri Lankans looked real uncomfortable, because they don't want us to think they're superstitious. They wouldn't let the other guy talk anymore, so we left.

Art sat quiet for a moment, then sat up and said, "That's it. That's my mermaid story. You guys don't believe it, suit yourselves."

"I don't believe it," said Manny. "You're just pulling our leg."

"I wouldn't do that," said Art, standing up. "I wouldn't do that."

He grabbed Manny by the leg and dragged him out of the chair kicking and hollering until the boss, Nelson, came out and told them to cut the rough stuff. Then they all went outside, leaving Corazón glued to the counter by her greasy rag until Nelson told her to get back to work. She hurried out to clean up their table and found a small, rough pebble where

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art had sat. Without thinking, Corazón slipped it into her pocket before picking up the plastic cups and running her damp rag across the tabletop.

That night, Corazón dreamed again of the rise and fall of the waves. But this time, she was in the waves, not on them. She felt her long green hair as it trailed about her neck and shoulders, and the little fish that moved under her hands and brushed her sides as she swam. When she rose out of the water on her tail, she could just glimpse a crumbling white temple through the trees of the island. A piercing whistle startled her awake, but was only the alarm clock saying it was time to get up.

Corazón stumbled to the bathroom, where she was disappointed by her short, lifeless hair and flat chest. No warrior mermaid wore glasses. Only a waitress at Dixie's in San Antonio. She threw down her glasses and got in the shower to disperse the night's dreams.

Corazón stopped being a passenger on the ship, and scarcely listened to Art's stories when he came in now. As the end of his leave approached, he spent less time in Dixie's, and probably more time with Queenie.

Corazón stopped writing to the aunt and uncle in San Francisco, and gave up on the polo player and the European playboy. She laid the imaginary pink dress and coat in a steamer trunk, and carefully wrapped the wide-brimmed hat in tissue paper before placing it in a leather hatbox. Then she shed her clothes and jumped overboard into the still green waters of the lagoon. She found a copper spear lying on the white sand, green with age, and carried it as lightly as a cane. It fit her hand exactly.

"I'm going to have to let you go if you don't shape up," said Nelson. "You've been daydreaming an awful lot lately. There're plenty more would like your job if you don't."

Corazón promised to pay more attention. But the bright Texas sunlight hurt her eyes now, and she longed for the watery depths of sleep. She moved clumsily about the diner, thrashing at glasses as though they were always out of reach, dropping the plastic trays when she tried to stack them on the counter. Only at night did she move gracefully, the warm waters like a mantle across her shoulders, the whistling language ringing in her ears.

The day before his leave ended, Art stopped in at Dixie's to say goodbye to the boys. There was a lot of kidding around and punching, and Corazón went to the back room to get supplies and escape the noise. As she opened the swinging door from the back, Corazón heard one of the boys ask Art if he really had seen a mermaid.

"Yeah, a beaut," said Art, "A real sailor's dream. And you know what I'd do if I caught one?"

Here, Art suggested something that couldn't possibly be done to a mermaid, twisting his thumb low in the air before him as he said it. The boys giggled wickedly, if a little uncertainly, and Corazón sagged against

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the door, unable to go either out or back. She realized at that moment, as though she had been struck in the face, that Art had done this to her sister Queenie. All the blood rose to her head, then drained away. She dropped the plastic plates and paper napkins on the floor. Corazón turned dully when footsteps approached.

"What's the matter?" asked Nelson. "You look awful."

"I don't feel so good," she answered.

"Take the afternoon off," said Nelson. "This weather's getting to everyone. It's quiet anyway." She stooped to pick up the plates, but Nelson stopped her and motioned for her to leave. Corazón mechanically removed her apron and got her purse out of the closet. She didn't remember walking home.

Corazón skipped supper that evening. She went to bed early, saying that her head hurt.

"Well, what's wrong with *her?*" said Queenie sarcastically. She was on her way to meet Art, and pouted her lips in the hall mirror to make sure her lipstick was right.

That night, Corazón's bed was rocked by steep waves. She hung on desperately and gulped ragged breaths of air as each wave rose up and up before crashing down on her. The room tipped from side to side and the wind screamed as Corazón clung to the blankets and shut her eyes tightly.

Finally, Corazón could hold on no more, and was wrenched from the bed and thrown into the depths of the black sea. Her lungs burning, she gasped and her mouth filled with water. A searing pain tore her in two before she gasped one last time and her lungs burst.

The stormy sea quieted. Corazón drifted up, lifted on a stream of bubbles. She pitied the poor creature lying on the sea bottom, pale and spent, its hair in its eyes. She brushed back her own luxuriant green tendrils before darting off to join her sisters.

They found Corazón the next morning lying on the floor, limp as a wrung-out washrag. A line of salt crusted her upper lip, and there was sand under her nails. A stroke, said the doctor, brought on by the heat and dehydration.

When her clenched fist was pried open, a rough, pink object fell out. Coral, shaped like a heart.

"That's Art's," said Queenie, and was suddenly silent.

Art had sailed that morning for Japan, and wasn't due to return for a long time.

Corazón opened her eyes just then and looked at her sister, unable to speak. Queenie, crying, left the room.

Corazón stayed in the hospital for several days, then home for many

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

weeks, propped in a chair by the window. When her sister delivered a baby the following spring, Corazón moved into an apartment with her to help take care of the little girl. Jade, as they called her, had eyes the color of seawater, or of a Texas sky just before a storm.

Corazón gradually got well, but everyone agreed that she was different after that. She moved with a purposeful stride, and wheeled her sister's baby down the street as if they were on parade. Sometimes she disappeared for days at a time, and people said that she was meeting a man in Galveston.

Others said that she returned with a wild look in her copper eyes, and on her flesh the strong smell of the sea. But everyone agreed that she wore a pink stone at her throat, suspended on a thin gold chain, and shaped exactly like a human heart. ●

GRAVITATIONAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS

The force that keeps the stars
In wheels around galactic centers—
That holds the planets
In ellipses near the Sun—

The force that like a great attractor
Pulls the local groups of galaxies
Together like a crowd of cousins
Swarming toward Thanksgiving—

That generates the love of water
For the Moon—that warps and crushes Io,
Causes her to cling to Jupiter
Like a daughter holding to a brutal parent—

The force that pulls together planets,
Some in ancient times would call
The soul of spheres, or some in modern
Times the gulleys of continuum.

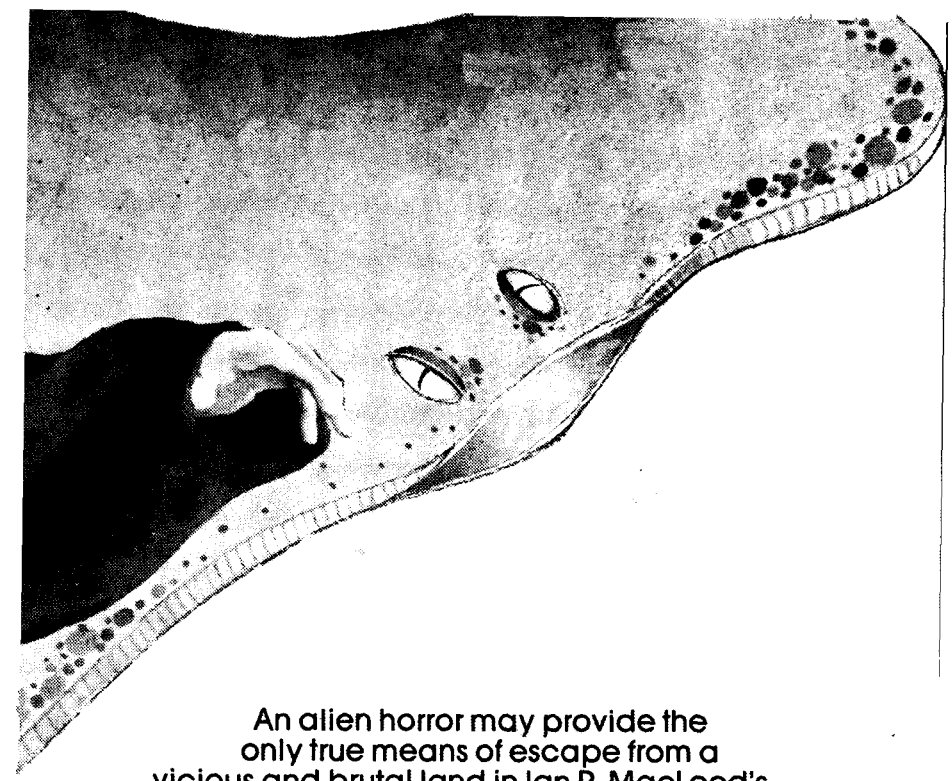
And some would say that souls,
Like stars, are subject to the forces
Nature shackles galaxies and planets with.
The force that keeps two stars revolving

In co-orbital directions is the shadow
Of the force between two souls: affection.

—Dana Wilde

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



An alien horror may provide the only true means of escape from a vicious and brutal land in Ian R. MacLeod's . . .

THE GIVING MOUTH

by Ian R. MacLeod

art: George Thompson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I was a child before I was your king. And even though the redbrick tower where I lived with my parents had many windows that gazed over the Pits, I was raised in what you think of as poverty. Each morning I woke on my pallet of stale straw to the scream of the shift whistle and the clang of the pitwheels. The sound was as familiar to me as birdsong, but the shock of the grey light and the mineral stench always came like a physical blow.

Put simply, I was a dreamer. And righteous youth made me certain that my dreams were real. I was convinced that there was a better world than the one I found myself in—and not as some abstraction, but as tangible as the grit in my hair and the dirt in the seams of my clothing. Sometimes I could almost see it shimmering at the corners of my eyes; on saint's days when the wind came from the right direction—from the east, and not too strong—when the church bells rang, and the underworkers donned ribbons to roam the fair camped in the dust before Castleiron.

But I could only pretend. Everyone knew that there had always been mines. That since the day that the Great Beast first spewed out this mineral kingdom, Castleiron had always risen like a fist from the green moat at the floor of the valley. And that liveiron and plain iron and copper and zinc were all that separated us humans from the fleas we plucked from our skin.

I remember that on the afternoon when my story truly begins, I had been wandering in the marshes between the slagheaps and the Pits, where the waters rainbowed oil and exposed minerals made grasses and flowers in the colors of dream. Copper green. Cobalt blue. Oxide red. A lonely place, usually pretty, although often things nested and grew there that sent me stumbling away in disgust. So I was always looking around in the wash of light, half in joy, half in fear. And, glancing up that afternoon, I saw a figure sitting atop a drift of ash thrown up by the summer gales and honeycombed by the burrowings of a copperworm. A face angled up toward the white sun, eyes quivered shut. Just a girl. But she was bathed in light made pure at every angle of cloth and limb. Everything about her was separate. And although part of my mind still knew that she was just some underworker crawled up into the light for a few hours, escaping as I tried to escape, that part was drowned in greater knowledge.

I stared. It seemed quite impossible that my gaze wouldn't break the bubble of her perfection. But there she sat, beautiful and unperturbed, glossy coils of hair at her shoulders stirred like ivy by the wind from the Pits. Eventually, afraid the vision would burst inside me, I turned and ran back toward my tower.

Fool that I was, I tried to explain all this to my father that night.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He was standing with his palm pressed against a window high in the tower, in the big empty room he liked to call his study, looking out, his lips trailing white from the cigarette he was smoking—like an old man's beard. He heard my footsteps by the door as I crept by toward places even the servants had forgotten about. I froze at the sound of his voice, but he was only saying, Well Son and How Are You. Come Right In. Here into this big room. He turned, outlined against the flickering light, the cigarette bright at his mouth, glowing red in his eyes. I didn't flinch as he reached out to pat my shoulder, didn't shiver with relief as he thought better of it.

And how are you, Son?

I didn't answer. He asked me again. Bittersweet smoke puffed into my eyes. It was hard to make out his face, but I knew that he would be putting on his smile, the one that bared teeth the color of soot-browned ice. It hovered with the smoke in the air between us, unresolved. I squeaked Fine, Pop, Just Fine, in a voice that was notched toward breaking.

Something bumped the window. A white nocturnal creature, falling dead from the glass and tumbling down the drop of the tower like spit. I looked out beyond in the direction my father had been staring. The furnaces glowing down the valley, a thousand dogends dropped amid the mines. Up beyond Castleiron, the headlights of a steamhorse hauling some load up the Great Road briefly ribboned the cliffs gold. People living, sweating, burrowing, sleeping . . .

My father crushed his cigarette beneath his boot. He immediately started up another, the match flame making his face first handsome, then old, then hideous. His lips putted wetly. He puffed in silence. I waited. I was unused to his company. When he wasn't working, cursing the underworkers or snatching half-done tasks from the hands of the servants, he spent his time up here alone. I had little contact with him apart from the hotly unreal occasions when he chose to discipline me. Dreamer that I was, I liked to suppose that, up here where the furnaces bled across the moon, my father might also dwell on better worlds than this. And with the image of the girl in the marshes still pouring through my blood with a power I could only just begin to understand, it seemed like a time for saying things that didn't usually have words.

So I spoke. I could taste the corroded air. Hear the dusty sigh of a furnace engine. And doubtless I sounded like the fanciful, half-satisfied child that I was. But still I believed in the truth of my feelings. And I would like to think that there was some poetry in my expression, that it was that which made my father react as he did. For although children may dream of other worlds, every adult has had childhood stolen from them. Even my father was filled to the brimming with hidden dreams.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He nodded and drew on his cigarette with that hasty and somehow furtive gesture that—like his smile—was all his own, pooling red shadows in his hollowed cheeks. He waited without interruption for me to finish.

"What you're telling me, Son," he said, "is that you think that what you see out of this window is wrong? That nothing is as it should be? Is that exactly right?"

No, of course, not *exactly*. But still I nodded.

"And where do you think all this is going to get you?"

"I . . ." the jaggedly precise tone in his voice was enough to make me hesitate ". . . I don't know. It's just a feeling."

"Just a feeling." He took a long drag on his cigarette. A golden worm trembled at his mouth. "Hold out your hand."

I was no fool. I did as he said. I watched and waited as he ground the cigarette out in my palm. And I stood for as long as I could while he beat me. Then I crouched. Then I lay. My father wanted to teach me a lesson, and, for once, he did. He was a man raised from this kingdom, risen from the gritty soil. When he looked out of the window of this room he liked to call his study, he saw the world as it was and allowed no place for love or hope or beauty. Not in himself, nor in anyone else who came close to him.

I realized later, as I lay sobbing in my pallet, splattered with droppings of moonlight, that tonight had been a bad time to approach my father about anything. He was a dour man at the best of times, but tomorrow Queen Gormal had decreed that all the nobility should attend Castleiron. No one who had received that command would rest easy tonight.

I stood outside the tower with the servants next morning, shivering in the dusty wind as our best steamhorse was led from the stables to carry my parents down the valley to Castleiron. My father's jaw was clenched tight. My mother looked white and ill. A bruise—remnant of a week-old argument—was fading to orange on her cheek. I was more than old enough to have an idea of what they might expect at Castleiron. How the queen would harangue them from the throne set within the cavernous skeletal mouth of the Great Beast that had spewed out this kingdom and all the riches beneath. How they would have to watch as the royal sentinels hauled some poor wretch from the crowd. How the noblest houses of this land would all stand stiff-faced as the daggers flashed and blood pattered the stones.

You will understand by now that my father kept himself to himself. He had no more time for the other noble houses than he had for the excesses of Queen Gormal. And my mother was a quiet woman who shared his bed when he demanded and checked the books and placated

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the servants when his brutality went too far. They were trapped by their high birth in the machinations of Castleiron, but in their different ways they were both well equipped to ride the various bloody tides. In his own sullen manner, my father managed to keep balance during the more severe swings of power, even when the rooks that nested in the abandoned mines near our tower were absent for days as they feasted on the bodies hung out as example from the walls of Castleiron.

That morning, after my father had climbed aboard the steamhorse and hauled my mother up after him, he looked around at the grey landscape and sniffed the sulfurous air. His colorless eyes traveled over the flaking brick of the tower, the upturned faces of the servants. For a moment, I imagined that he was taking in what he thought might be his last glimpse of home. But then his gaze settled on me as I stood unconsciously rubbing my freshening bruises, cupping my fingers around the weeping blisters on my palm. In an instant, I realized that my punishment was not yet finished.

He cracked his lips into a smile. Teeth like discolored ice. A sudden gust of wind batted a scrap of ash into his face. He pushed it away and it tumbled into the sky.

"Come on, Son," he said, a grey smear now on his cheek. "About time you grew up. Hop aboard."

I stepped forward. He held out thin fingers. They were tight on my wrist, jerking me up like a rope.

The steamhorse sighed and tensed its copper flanks. The gears spun and the flywheels strained. I gripped my mother's waist as we left the tower behind. Through the slagheaps. Burrow openings to the corrugated realm of the underworkers. Toward Castleiron. Ashlar stone black as coal. My stomach coiled like a slug in acid as we crossed the stinking green moat. In the cold shadow of the courtyard, other steamhorses hissed and idled their gears. We joined the thin drift of nobility under the rusted archway that led to the State Rooms. I looked around, breathing the ferrous reek of power, my curiosity battling with my fear. In those declining times when the daylight plundered all dreams, the soot-encrusted ceilings and rotting drapes still had a kind of beauty, albeit one that was not pleasant to behold.

Queen Gormal had arranged a banquet that filled the tables stretched far back into the mildewed darkness of the Great Hall. Through some quirk, my father and my mother and I were destined to sit close to the throne, our faces illuminated in the glare of the smoking sheep's-head lanterns chained from the weary roof. The food was actually quite good by the sour standards of that time. It had been the custom of her predecessor, Cardinal Reichold, to compel the nobility to eat substances too vile for easy description whilst he rocked with laughter on the throne

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and sipped lemon tea, but Queen Gormal wished to impress us all with her generosity. She had set before us silver platters steaming with heart of agront, hot pickled turnip, and salt loin of lamb.

The jaws of the Great Beast yawned up toward the dim ceiling. Only something so huge could have dwarfed the queen as she sat overlapping her throne, set like a white epiglottis inside the skeletal throat. She was as round as a snowberry and twice as bitter. She was eating. Not one to waste energy, she had an eater machine clamped over her face, in much the same manner as a hound might wear a muzzle, although with the opposite intention. Some inventor had cast its prototype in liveiron decades before, the intention being to help those who were too weak or ill to work their jaws and swallow. But the device had been taken up instead by those such as the queen, who wished to avoid the effort of working their throat and jaws as they ate. Two sentries had put aside their ceremonial halberds to load choice items from the feast into the hopper at the front.

I drank the hot wine from the goblet at my side and worked at the food left-handed. I was old enough to relish the ease the unaccustomed tartness of the wine brought to my bruises and my anxiety. But the grease-smeared faces, the clangorous music, and the squelching of the eater machine all struck a false note. These were worse than average times. Out in the flatlands to the east, beyond the forest where the Great Road met farms and fields and the sky was reportedly blue in summer, close to where mythical Ocean was said to support the land, there was reported to be a Blight. Not canker or insect or disease, but a half-creature that flapped from tree to tree like sheeting caught in a storm; that dragged itself moaning through the fields and orchards, drawing away nutrition and flavor; and that enveloped the cattle whole and sucked on them like a baby at the nipple, leaving their meat rancid and off-white. At night it howled against the church bells, and was rumored to slide through the windows of hovels to suck the minds from those who were sleeping, leaving the bodies behind, breathing and empty.

It all sounded like the kind of story that starts with a grain of deceit and grows tumorous in the retelling, yet only two days before my mother had purchased one of the first of the year's crop of cabbages from the market beneath Castleiron. Almost fresh from its journey west on the trains of steamhorses, it had seemed a bargain, yet the cooking of it had filled our tower with a stink redolent of the smell that came from the straw of my pallet on the hottest of days. And when we tried to eat it, the texture of the plump leaves was like gritty snow. I guessed that in this banquet Queen Gormal was using up the last of the previous year's stores, in the kind of binge that the weak use to try to stave off the future. In any event, the signs were bad.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

So it seemed to me that this meal might be the last decent one any of us would have for some time. And for all the falsity of the celebration, I was determined to enjoy it. Whilst others shouted and banged their goblets and dropped morsels of their food to the stone flags, where the rats of Castleiron scurried them away, I kept my head down and chewed every last scrap down to the peel and the marrow, and wiped up the remaining juices with a slab of bread until I could see my face staring back at me from my plate. Making the most of the rare sense of well-being brought on by the wine and a full belly, I leaned back on the bench and looked around. My mother—normally a delicate eater—had virtually finished too and was dabbing grease from her lips with the corner of her sleeve. The sounds of eating were quieting along the huge tables, and many were already climbing over the backs of the benches to stagger behind the screens and make use of the privy buckets. I reached for a dried apple from the pile in the center of the table, then drew back in surprise when I saw that the food on my father's plate was virtually untouched.

I looked at him. His face was the color of a slagheap. I risked asking him if he felt all right.

"I cannot abide the sweet meaty flavor of the agront," he growled. "The juice of the thing has soaked through everything on this dish."

I nodded, even though I knew nothing of the sort. I rarely ate with my father in our tower, and the pinkish flesh of agront, harvested wild from the mountainsides around the valley, was rare and expensive. But, admittedly, it did not do to think of the plant's nocturnal habits and its questing mouth when you were eating, nor of the strange fluorescence that eating it brought to the stools.

I looked along the flickeringly lit table, sprawling with shadows. My father's full plate was already obvious amid the ruins of the banquet.

"Look," I said to him. My palm was throbbing and I could still feel the bruises from my beating, but I was bold with the wine. "Pass what you can over to my plate and drop the rest on the floor. We can't be seen—"

My voice trailed off the sudden wave of silence as Queen Gormal smashed her goblet against the iron arm of her throne. She waved the sentries to unclasp the bolts and flywheels of the eater machine from her face.

"Now," she spoke. A pretty almost songlike voice that was at odds with almost everything else about her. I risked glancing up at the throne. My heart kicked me twice in the chest, then seemed to stop. Her arm was raised and her index finger was pointing straight at my father. Some odd corner of my mind that was still ticking over noted how the rings she wore were sunk deep, so that even the stones barely showed, how the clamps of the eater machine had mottled her face like ringworm.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You," she crooned, "you who have not eaten. Stand up."

My father hesitated a fraction, just to make certain that she did indeed mean him. But there was no doubt. He climbed to his feet awkwardly, his knees bent forward by the edge of the bench. All jollity had died. The whole hall was brimming with a silence broken only by the squabbling rats and the sputtering lanterns. As with every other audience, the time had come for the screeching of agony and denial. I saw that the sentries who stood beside the jaws of the Great Beast were resting their hands on their knives and smirking like kids who couldn't wait to open a present.

"Tell me why," the queen said, her cheeks trembling, "you have chosen to revile my hospitality?"

"Your Majesty," my father spread his nicotined hands; an unconscious gesture of helpless innocence that fitted the man as badly as an undersized coat. "The taste of agront—even agront of this undoubted excellence—is like a poison to me. Just as you yourself—"

"Shut up!" Trickles of oily moisture that could have been tears or sweat or the juices of what she had been eating ran down her cheeks and settled in the folds of her neck.

My father let his hands drop. My mother gave a burping sob and stifled it with her hand.

The queen leaned forward in her throne, out of the mouth of the Great Beast, squinting at him through the smoky light. "I hardly recognize you. What house are you of?"

Hemmed in by the table, my father just managed a bow. More inappropriate than ever now, a half-smile drew shadows across his face. Glancing up at him, this lonely creature of fear and power, I felt a sick frission of joy that he had come to this. I hated myself for the feeling, but I couldn't help it: I hated my father still more. "The redbrick tower, Your Majesty."

She slumped back. "Then eat the agronts."

Whispers rippled down the tables into the yellow depths of the hall. Was that *all*? To eat the agronts? The luck of the man! Why *I* would eat—

Slowly, my father shook his head. "No, Your Majesty. I will do your bidding on any other matter. But as I have explained in all humility, the taste is abhorrent to me."

She sat rigid. Even the rats seemed to quiet down. Yet his face was set firm.

The Queen gripped the edges of the throne. Her mountainous breasts began to tremble, and the facets and chains of her necklaces flashed red. Then she opened her mouth and let out a barking yelp, a sound oddly similar to that which the agront itself made when it was immersed in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

boiling oil. She yelped again. He face reddened. There was a long and excruciating pause before anyone realized that she was laughing. But as soon as people began to force grins to their lips, she waved her hand for silence.

"Well, my lord of the redbrick tower. You have the stupidity to honor your stomach above your queen—"

"—Majesty, I—"

"—and yet, you also seem to have a stubborn bravery about you that these swine around you lack." She put out a pink tongue to draw the saliva back from her chin. "Sir, we have a task for you. You will have heard of the Blight that haunts the edge of our lands. Doubtless some plot of those who would lay all bounty to waste. But, so far, wizardry has failed. I command you, oh lord of the delicate stomach, to don your armor and go on Quest. I command you to slay the Blight."

My father bowed. "Willingly, Your Majesty." He obviously realized that, virtual death sentence that this was, it was as good as he was likely to get. And at least it avoided the indignities that the sentries would inflict with their knives.

She waved him to sit down. And the pudding was carried forth steaming from the kitchens. Orangebark on a bed of sweet lettuce. My father ate his portion with mechanical absorption, his grey jaws tensing and untensing like liveiron.

The family suit of armor had hung for decades from hooks in a high and draughty corner of our tower, greased with rancid goose oil to keep it from rusting. I remember first stumbling across it on some early exploratory jaunt through the rambling stairwells and dusty rooms—and how the sight of it gleaming black as a sloughed snakeskin had robbed me for nights of my sleep. When the wind howled down from the Ferrous Mountains and the tower rattled like a dry poppyhead, the suit would sway and clang in the darkness, filling my dreams with the clamor of cracked bells.

The morning after the banquet, my father commanded my mother and myself to watch as he was clad in the suit. The servants muttered and trembled as they puzzled over how it should be reassembled. Every poitrel and plate was black as the kitchen caldrons. My father struck out at them and clanged and howled his impotent rage. But slowly the task was accomplished. His thin body was swallowed in iron.

He clashed his way out into the bitter air. His heavy sabots sunk deep into the ash. The rooks were cawing, circling. The waiting steamhorse was chuffing restlessly. It had its fill of the best coal in the stables, and although it was too stupid to understand the importance of the journey, it sensed that something unusual was afoot. Its headlights glowed. Its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

piston arms were hot with anticipation. My father lumbered over. Pushing away all offers of help, he climbed aboard. He looked loose and heavy as a sack of clinker.

He donned his helmet and creaked up the visor. His white, bitter face peered down at us like some martyr looking out from the devouring mouth of a dragon. He shouted to my mother. She fumbled matches and a cigarette, coughing as she drew on the flame to get it alight. She passed it up toward him. He seized it in his gauntlet and sat there smoking clumsily through clenched lips. I think the thing that angered him more than anything was the realization of how foolish he appeared inside the armor. It really did look as though it had eaten him. He tried to say something, but his words were lost in the sigh of idling pistons and the hiss of the boiler. He threw the cigarette into the dust. Before he let the visor clang down, I had one last glimpse of his face. It was twisted in disgust.

A clanking automaton, less flesh and blood then the steamhorse itself, he let in the gears. The steamhorse tensed its wheels. The whistle screeched, and it rumbled away between the slagheaps, trailing a flag of sparks and steam, off towards the Great Road and the forest and the flatlands, to do battle with the Blight. Dogs and children followed for a while in his tracks, but my mother and I remained standing beside our tower, where the rooks cawed and circled the grey air that—amid the scents of coal and toil—carried the fading odors of tobacco and goose grease. We turned and hugged each other in a brief, stiff embrace that at least avoided the necessity for words. Then we went inside to wait for news.

The harvest in the flatlands was a nightmare. My father must have passed the straggling trains of steamhorse-drawn wagons as he headed along the Great Road, each hopper brimming with glossy apples, parsnips as long as your arm, and mountains of blackberries dribbling juice into the mud. As always, most were destined for the salt vats, the presses, the smoke houses and the drying racks, but those which did find their way to the markets soon spread panic. The apples had the texture of pustules, the parsnips had the flavor of ancient dung: or so it was said by those who claimed the dubious enlightenment of such comparisons. In any event, they were indisputably foul, and gave no nourishment.

The minewheels still turned. The smokestacks poisoned the sky. By some irony, a new seam of liveiron was struck that promised the finest pedigree of steamhorse in decades, and these were prosperous times for underworkers, with bonus hours for anyone fit enough to work them. But the fresh money chased fewer and fewer goods. What remained of last year's supplies were bought for figures—and, increasingly, other

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

types of currency—that only the most wealthy or the most desperate could afford to pay.

We were fortunate, in our tower. My mother invariably expected the worst and she always saw to it that the larders were full. Now that my father was absent, she could make the most of her pessimist's satisfaction at being right.

Late autumn fell in filthy torrents from the sky. The bricks in our tower oozed the smell of the ancient river clay from which they had been made. I would stare for hours from the window of a forgotten room I had taken to thinking of as my own, watching the mines claw through the mud, still dreaming of that girl I had seen sitting on the drift of ash above the marsh, her face tilted to the sun. Although my room was far distant from the place in the tower that my father had liked to call his study, sometimes I would look around me with a start. But then I would smile. Even in this grim season, there was a fresh sense of ease about the tower with my father gone. I was free to dream of things that never were. Worlds of pretty and of gold. And to watch the puddles along the empty track that led toward the Great Road.

I remember the morning that my father returned. Several weeks before, I had discovered a stock of his old cigarettes. I suppose that curiosity must have driven me to try them, but even now I cannot say what made me persist in breathing the foul smog that was quite different from what I expected, and yet so reminiscent of my father. But I did persist. And I was smoking as I stood with my palm pressed against the streaming glass of my own empty room. I had grown used to it, almost to like it, although the bitter grey still stung my eyes. My thoughts were anywhere but on the world outside the window. But I instantly heard, faint but unmistakable over the rain, the chuff of the steamhorse and the squelch of iron wheels pulling through the jellied mud. I crushed out my cigarette and half-fell down the tumbling stairways. Into the sooty rain.

It was a steamhorse. With redgold livery showing through the rust. And there was my father, fully suited and balanced atop the iron saddle, water steaming off the oiled plates of his armor. I splashed out toward him, still half-hoping that it wasn't true. I grabbed the raised stirrups of the steamhorse. As I looked up, the rain streaming into my eyes, the breastplate dropped from his chest. I had to jump backward as metal tumbled by. White flesh showed. Then my father fell too, half-naked into the mud. The visor broke up over his face. He was smiling. The steamhorse ambled on through the rain toward the tower, shedding what remained of the suit.

I bellowed for the servants to pick up the body and the jigsaw trail of armor. Cowering at my threats, they did as I commanded. They stripped him in the rain. He was like one of the dead chicks that the rooks tossed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out from their nests each spring. But he was breathing. He was *smiling*. As my mother sobbed and chewed her knuckles, the servants formed a makeshift stretcher. They carried him through cold halls, along damp corridors, up stairways. His limbs rolled off the stretcher and scuffed the steps. I ordered them to take him to the room he had liked to call his study, to place him atop a table beside the window where he used to stand. And then I drove them all away.

I looked into eyes that were the no-color of rain. At least they hadn't changed. I touched his bony chest and felt the birdcage flutter of his heart, the stirring of his lungs. The Blight had taken him: pushed him through to another world. That smile came from somewhere deep within, boring a hole right through me, up through this tower, the rain, up to the place where sunlight beamed blue over candyfloss. There was no sign of damage or injury, but he didn't even smell the same. Certainly not the sour and disappointed aroma of sweat and cigarettes that I associated with my father's body . . . that I had come to associate with myself.

How pleasant it would be to tell you that I set out clad in greasy armor and mounted aboard a steamhorse to overcome the Blight. And imagine your pride to know that your king was a hero. But, in truth, if there had been a knife in my hand, I would have killed my father. Driven the steel in hard, over and over again. I hated that smile. It was everything that he had denied in himself, and in me.

But I told myself that I was head of the household now. And I was afraid that violence would only make me more like him than I already was. Losing your father—even in a way such as this—simply brings you face to face with who and what you are. That was the most hateful thing of all.

I let him live. I screamed for the servants. He was thin now beyond malnourishment. I ordered them to search every room in the tower until they found an eater machine to feed him. And I saw to it that they did so.

On Saint Ely's day, the moat froze solid around Castleiron. Both despite and because of the privations of the winter and the Blight, it was a signal for jollity. The pit wheels stopped turning. The church bells boomed. Children clambered through barbed wire to tie ribbons to the steamhorses grazing the coal seams at the head of the valley. Feeling sick with myself, I stood at a window in my own empty room, watching the dark streams of underworkers emerge from their chaotic dwellings and spread through the frost like ants in sugar. But, to her credit, my mother forced her swollen legs up the stairways in search of me. Freed from the threat of my father, she had become a different, more forceful person. While I moped and cursed the servants, she ran the tower.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I turned from the window as I heard her dragging footsteps. I drew on my cigarette, blinking through the haze and the shadows. She stood in the doorway, and her expression bore more than frustration at my weary indolence. There was anger and fear. Before I had time to argue, she shouted that no son of hers was going to spend his days like this. There was no way that she was going to let it happen. She was right, of course; saint's days were too rare to waste. She nagged me into boots and woolens. Not that I agreed at the time, but I was still half a child, and going outside seemed like less trouble than arguing.

Outside, the chimneys were topped for once by no more than pinkish sky. With the wagons and the pumps all still, my feet crunched loud on the clinker path. The valley resounded with a huge silence, like the last echo of a struck gong. I walked over the shifting slagheap, picking my way down between the tin flaps that covered the passageways to the underworkers' dwellings, on though the maze of the Pits. I was drawn by the sounds of life, of people—not specifically of voices and movement, but the indeterminate rumble that a crowd gives off as readily as the smell of close flesh. People laughing and talking and squabbling, people spending money they didn't have and making happy fools of themselves.

There was a fair close to the ice, on the flat wasteland that spread before Castleiron which people—in place of any number of more accurate descriptions—called the Meadow. The stall holders had taken their customary pitches. I let the flow of the crowd draw me down the breath-smogged passages, past brass incubi and shawls of woven steel for the wealthy, cast iron whistles and cheap trinkets for the poor. A liveiron automaton stumbled through the crush, his unoiled legs creaking and the glow almost gone from his headlights, offering the attractions of a tent where the curious could talk with the still-animated severed head of Cardinal Reichold. I had no money, but many of the sights were free. A copperworm from the deepest mines coiled around the quivering form of a dancer. A down-at-heel magician was offering Lightning Bolts While You Wait, although the peeling sign failed to suggest any useful purpose. Further on, the food stalls were more thinly spaced than I remembered from previous fairs, and the miasma of cooking meats and burnt toffee was replaced by the thinly rancid smell, unpleasantly reminiscent of the private parts of the human body, that we had all come to associate with the Blight. But even if there was little on display that would attract anyone with a full belly, the stalls nevertheless did good business.

But it was the ice that everyone had gathered for. The old to watch, the young to be truly young for a while. Normally, the moat was an odorous soup stirred by every imaginable effluent. But the cold had dispersed all but a ghost of the usual stench and set the liquid smooth as apple jelly. My grim mood was out of place: even the frost-cured faces

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the malcontents who dangled from the castle walls seemed to be grinning. I thought of my father, smiling too through the iron cage of an eater machine. In his own happy world. Then I tried to forget.

The flat-footed skaters sprawled, stood up, skimmed those miracle seconds before the next fall. I hardly recognized anyone beneath the dirty bindings, and those I did were servants and underworkers, not fit company for someone of my birth. But I joined in anyway, clumsy as a broken spring. Amid the skating figures, there was one that kept returning. We circled. We collided. The bare palms of my hands skidded though a melting patch, and I laughed as I hauled myself up from the knees. She was laughing, too. Eyes that were green as the ice, between a baggy hat and bandages of scarf. She had rag-doll limbs, rag-doll clothes, but I could feel her warmth burning through. And it was just a game as my arms brushed the softness of her breasts as we skated, just a game as she bumped her limbs against mine.

The rim of the sun broke evening over the ice. I tried to catch my breath at the wet edge. The girl skidded over to join me. She pulled the rags down from her face to her sharp certain chin. I saw that she was the girl I had seen sitting on the ash heap above the marsh. And although she was pretty beneath the grime, I felt a flash of resentment that she should break into my dreams. Still, I tried to talk to her, even though her accent was thick, like the sound of steamhorse slurry tipped down a chute.

The sky was darkening. The stalls of the fair were stripped to skeletons, fought over by the hungry rooks and the even hungrier rats. The ice was empty. Its glow had almost faded as we picked our way through the slushy earth at the edge of the Meadow. Looking back across the ice, her hand tight as a stone in mine, I thought I glimpsed something blacker than the shadows slide beneath the surface. Maybe some creature. Maybe nothing at all. It wasn't a time for thinking.

That silence in the valley that I had noticed early in the day was now a tight physical presence, something from a box within a box. The girl and I stood awkwardly together: two scarecrows all but ignored by the rooks bickering over the remains of the fair. She loosened the ties of the blanket she was wearing for a coat, and I could see the hollow of her neck, the sweat-glimmered divide of her breasts. The idea of talk was even more useless than before. We had come to that moment that all men and women (children though we still both undoubtedly were) must share without sharing. And I stepped forward in the half-thawed mud. She touched me inside the soft prison of her arms with chilly fingers and I answered without question.

The wind fluted a discord between the empty stalls. It was no use here. We needed to go somewhere. The tower was out of the question; my

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mother's instruction to make the most of the day certainly hadn't been intended to extend to *this*. There was, of course, a well-worn tradition of the nobility taking their pleasure with those who couldn't afford to refuse, but the tradition of hypocrisy was stronger still. And this time was different, just as all times have been different for everyone since the Great Beast first spewed out this mineral land.

She grabbed my hand and we hurried across the mis-named Meadow, on into the Pits. The bleached moon rode the wind above the ash heaps, but the paths led down, through twists and turns I could never have followed. Here the soot settled, the dirt gathered in drifts, the frost and the snow were never white. Tin roofs and pit props broke across tunnel throats. The sky closed over with rubble. She led me down.

Here, she said, and gestured toward some hole that was no different from the rest, probably worse if you looked closely. I glanced back, aware of mutterings and wet eyes twinkling, but the space was darkness without scale. She tugged me through into giving blackness. There were the gathering odors of mortality as we clawed away layers of our clothing, sharp explorations that became urgent and sweet. Her hot chewed lips against mine. But for all the blind clamor of my senses, there was a part of my mind that refused to dissolve, that was playing over the memory of each moment even before it happened.

The vision of the girl above the marsh: dissolved into this. Nothing was quite as it should be. I pulled her limbs the way I wanted them and she pushed back at me. Inexperienced children though we were, we reached some compromise and took our uncertain pleasure. Everything tunneled down. It was like the moment of waking when the dream fades. I realized, as I fell back and saw the faint moon-glimmer of her flesh, that even the darkness itself was less than absolute.

I slept. I dreamed the scent of dappled pine needles, some memory of a summer wind from the east that the Pits had yet to taint. When I opened my eyes, I saw the grey slopes of our limbs, entwined but separate. She mewed something half-awake. I smelled tears, and realized that she had been crying.

I asked her why.

We began to talk: talking in the darkness is sometimes easier than making love. She told me about her life, the undoing of certainties, the inexhaustible surprises of loss and age. For the first time, I realized that there are visions at the corner of everyone's eyes. Dreams that we dare not turn and face. Just as I had stumbled away from the sight of this girl above the marsh. Just as my father had tried to dissolve his own dreams in anger and bitterness.

We whispered the same words. Our incantations of humanity. Her face was above me, distant and close as the moon, eyes over my eyes, lips

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over my lips. And her need was inside my flesh, drawn tight beyond release. I loved her. I could feel the world pouring through me, all power and all innocence. And it was mine and I understood through her. For a moment, I knew everything.

I slept again, sweetly in her arms. I dreamed of the shadow I had seen beneath the ice. It was sliding between us. When I awoke there was enough light to make out the puff-ball rottenness of the cave. She had rolled away from me, still curled asleep, showing nothing but the bony architecture of her back. I touched her skin. I stroked the notches of her spine. I wanted fire and tenderness, but she didn't respond. She lay breathing lifelessly still. When I pulled her over, her limbs sprawled loose. And she was smiling. Her green eyes wide and staring right through my head and up beyond the clouds.

She was smiling like my father, neither dead nor alive.

I remembered the shadow under the ice. The shadow in my dream. The Blight had been here, taken her from me. Even as I wept, the Pits were clangorously awakening. My grief was drowned in noise before it left my throat.

On hands and knees, I dragged my clothes together. The face I had seen like a vision atop that heap of ash gazed at me without seeing. I kissed her ragged lips, the softness of her breasts. I breathed her skin. Her beautiful eyes were staring into a place I couldn't touch or feel or smell or see. I spread her hair in a burnished fan, I settled her limbs, her dirty-nailed hands. She looked beautiful beyond words, but even as I stared at her I grew afraid that the vision would shatter. I backed into the tight grip of the tunnel with a different kind of fear in my throat, almost glad to be away.

I entered a cavern, drizzled by daylight from crevices in the roof, bitter with smoke. I stumbled along the paths that seemed to lead upward. Whole families huddled around spitting fires. In places, I had to climb around these shivering mounds of flesh and clothing. But even when I was close enough to reach into the flames, there was hardly any heat.

Walking without thinking or caring, I soon came to broadening ways and the bright open sky. The shift whistles were starting to scream. Underworkers were emerging from the dirt, crossing the sharp landscape on their journeys from the holes where they lived to the ones where they worked. Many more, unseen, made their way underground through the honeycomb soil. The laboring steamhorses, hauling chains, driving pulleys that turned cogs that burrowed darkness, looked well-fed and well-oiled and plump compared to the underworkers who tended them.

The scent of the girl still lingered on my flesh, but already the feeling of loss was distant. All the richness had gone. My whole life seemed like a process of loss, as though the Blight had always been here, emptying

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the air to grey, draining every dream. Drawing and sucking like a leech until, emboldened, it took a form that this world could see.

I wandered out of a choking drift of steam, still unsure of my directions and in no hurry to find my way. Then I stopped and looked around. Scrap iron clawed the rubble. Grasping hands, trying to reach beyond. An underworker was singing a melody to the rhythm of cogs and chains. Gears within gears; worlds within worlds . . . and then my heart began to pound. Suddenly, I was close to a different dream.

I quickened my pace across the Pits. My way led past a church that pricked the sky amid the chimneys at the edge of the deepmines. A crowd had gathered on the loose mix of bones and rubble that formed the graveyard. As I approached, I heard screeching and wailing.

I slowed when I reached the spot, stumbling over uptilted femurs and broken memorials. The people were mostly underworkers, crossing themselves with tattered hands and murmuring imprecations to the saints. When I looked up at the blackened spire, I saw why.

A shadow was fluttering from the belfry. It had the texture of loose grey skin; a living flag. I could hear it muttering over the cries of the onlookers, words without meaning that were closer to baby talk than insanity. It was easing its way between the slats like leaves through a gutter. As it did so it began to sob, as though the process caused it much pain.

I stared for a few moments. So this was the fabled Blight, the thing that had made my father smile and robbed me of my love, flapping here, obvious as a dishcloth thrown against the sky. It must have been drawn by the resonance of the bells, driven by whatever hungers possessed it to try to suck out the potency of cast bronze. Looking up, the sight was sickening, without meaning, like the suffering the Blight itself carried. It taught me nothing, not even fear. I pushed my way through the onlookers without glancing back, on across the slagheaps beyond. When I reached a fork in the ways beside the ruins that led left toward my tower, I turned right.

It was hard work climbing the coalseamed fields where the steamhorses grazed each night. The creatures churned the steep edges of the valley to sand, and twice I had to stop myself tumbling backward by grabbing barbed wire. It hurt, but did little damage. And my luck held when I literally fell across a copperweave nosebag. I shook out the coaldust and hitched it over my shoulder like a sack.

Up above the field boundaries, there was nothing but rock and air. I stopped at last to catch my breath and look down over the Valley. It was grey. White. Black. Every color that wasn't a color. This far off in the chimney haze, even the moat of Castleiron was no longer green. The stench of sweat and sulphur brimmed over the mountains to the ravaged

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sky. This was my home and reality screamed at me though every pore, but now I was determined to change it. Maybe the dream had gone, but the Blight wasn't going to take me: *I* was going to take *it*.

I began to poke among the rocks, exploring the crevices where agronts sheltered in the day. I found the first one easily, a small thing still purplish from the seed pod. I ripped out its stamen before it had time to scream and stuffed it into my makeshift sack. But I needed many more, and the search took hours. I climbed. My limbs were agony, and the air raked my cigarette-clotted lungs. But, slowly, the sack grew heavier. The agronts were sly. They waited for me to commit myself to a lunge across sheer rock before skittering just out of reach. But I was driven. I took risks that the peasants who normally came up here with their sacks and skewers would never have chanced—not if they wished to survive.

And, all the while, the valley below churned life and sulphur. Faintly, I heard the evening shift whistles. Focusing away from the crevice I was clinging to, I saw that the sun was setting through the teeth of the mountains. My shadow stretched across a nearby peak. I was incredibly high now and the sack was heavy on my back. I could feel one or two of the larger agronts that I had failed to kill outright still squirming. Maybe I had enough. Those I pursued now were old and wary, survivors of many night forays into the valley to dog the sleeping and the unwary. And doubtless they had been hunted many times before. I chanced looking directly down at the swimming drop. I saw that the granddaddy of all agronts was climbing my leg.

A shock went through me. One moment my fingers were scrabbling at the rock. The next I was in air. Flying. It was easy to fall. But quickly my bones thundered and I realized that I couldn't have dropped far, not if I felt pain at all. I dragged myself up. The sack was not far off. The wounded agront was trying to haul itself into hiding on knobby arthritic roots. I kicked it to stillness.

There was a way down through the rocks. Half falling, half walking, I followed. Darkness settled. The steamhorses paused in their rootings for coal to track me with their headlights, the beams moted with soot. They were gentle animals; I remember them now with fondness. That night it was almost as though they were trying to help me find the way. Down into the Pits, where there was always black and fire. Across the slagheaps. To the redbrick tower I called my home.

My mother was sitting in the main hall. A fire was burning, but it gave off more smoke than light. I was grateful; it meant that she could hardly see me.

She asked me the questions she thought she was expected to ask. Her son missing for a night and a day. Genuinely, I think she loved me. But her voice was without warmth. The Blight was here, too. I could feel it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in my own bones, killing even the bruises, the cracked ribs, the pain. Oh, where have you been, my son . . . I stumbled briefly into her arms and let her kiss me, felt her muted wonder at the state I was in. Her breath smelt of coal. There were questions she couldn't ask, questions I couldn't answer. In a hurry for it to end, I broke away, banging the copperwire sack up the stairs behind me.

Passages I knew from childhood. Old friend shadows and grinning cracks in the wall. Places I could shake hands with. The room that my father liked to call his study. Where he escaped from everything but life itself. And now even that. He was stretched out beside the big window where furnacelight and moonlight webbed the darkness. The smile on his face glowed through the iron bars of the eater machine. The smile that he could never quite manage on his own.

I was breathing hard, I could smell the tower, bricks and blocked chimneys and forgotten chamber pots gone cloudy-ripe under unmade beds. And the hot metal and clinker and oil and coal dust in the stables. And the smoke and sulphur of the mines, the reek of clay freshly exposed to air. And the human smells of the Pits, of dreams forgotten for too long. And the bittersweet reek of corrupted power from inside the high walls of Castleiron. And the faint musty odor of the cigarettes my father used to smoke as he stood looking out.

The eater machine was idling, squatting over his face. The hopper was empty and the liveiron muscles gently tensed and loosened, just keeping in trim. My father didn't need much food. It was hardly a drain on his energy, just lying here smiling.

The open mouth of the copperwire sack gave off the mixed scents of coaldust and agront. I fumbled out the first creature; a small one. I ripped off the fingery roots and fed the fat leaves one by one into the hopper. Then another agront from the sack. Bigger, and still living. Its roots curled tight around my wrist. I plucked out the warm stamen to kill it. The roots shuddered and went dead. I began to pull off the leaves, then thought better of it and simply dropped the whole thing into the hopper. The machine's arms began to move, probing open my father's lips and reaching inside between teeth still stained brown, to work his tongue and jaw, pushing chunks of agront inside. I dropped another agront in whole. And another. And another. The juices began to dribble and spray as the eater machine picked up speed. My father's jaw moved jerkily and without volition. Inside his mouth, the gripper pressed the mush down into his throat, where the constricting bands around his neck took over. Even to someone like myself, who would normally have relished the prospect of eating fresh agront, the sight was enough to tangle my stomach.

The machine slithered and pulsed, happy as liveiron only could be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when working. It was impossible for my father to smile now, and his eyes gave nothing away as his belly was pumped full. The eager machine had possessed his body, his face. I just kept on feeding the hopper. The remaining agronts began to squirm inside the sack, catching the reek of death, perhaps sensing in their own small way that something more was about to happen. I had to keep the neck tight to prevent them from escaping.

Then movement made me look up. Something fluttering over and over against the stars. Like ash on a breeze, but bigger. I paused in my labors, the torn roots of an agront twisting in my hands. I smiled. It was coming. The Blight was coming.

Then my eyes were snatched down again as my father gave a liquid belch. His body was trying to vomit, throw out the pulp that the eater machine was forcing inside. But the glistening liveiron tensed and redoubled its efforts, pushing in more and more. His back arched. Iron tensed against flesh, but it seemed as though there was no competition. The eater machine simply quivered and pulsed harder.

The shadow beyond the window widened. Taking out the stars, the moon, the dogend glow of the Pits. The headlights of a steamhorse briefly ribboned the valley cliffs with gold. Then that too was gone. The Blight thumped gibbering against the window, sucking away most of the light. Its grey mass seethed, searching the panes for weakness. It found a gap. Sobbing, it forced a tendril through. The tendril shuddered, feeling blindly. My father coughed and strained again as the eater machine forced the pulp through his smile, down into his dreamworld. A pane shattered, spraying in. A blade of glass sliced past my cheek. More of the Blight flooded in.

Sound was everywhere now. The Blight. Breaking glass. The squealing of the remaining live agronts. The pump of the eater machine. The clamor of the Pits. And then everything was lost in a larger sound as my father opened his mouth wider than the eater machine could hold. Liveiron splintered and flew like axed wood. My father's jaws still widened. I remembered a steelsnake I had seen eating a rat down by the marshes. I thought of the whole world being swallowed. Then, for a dizzy moment, I was looking down. Flesh, bone, gristle, bursting apart. Impossibly, there was something beyond. My father's mouth yawned wider. It cracked open his head. It spread, floor to ceiling. There was hardly anything left of my father now, just pink rags, but still his mouth continued to grow.

A billion things happened at once. Many years later, a sentry who was standing guard on the parapets of Castleiron at that moment bowed before this golden throne and told of how he had heard a sound that was deeper than thunder and felt movement that shook him through his boots. He said that he knew it was either the beginning or the end of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

world. Then he had looked across the swarming darkness of the Pits, and saw light.

I saw only chaos. Splashing wounds from the glass, the Blight broke fully into the room. It fought its way against the tide as the whole tower rocked and fountained bricks into the sky. The jaws were still stretching. The Blight stretched, too. Ragged scraps of it circled like leaves in a whirlwind as it poured itself down into the cavernous mouth. Its gibberings ceased forever and I felt the hot waves of its delight.

As what remained of the Blight and my father joined, there was a moment of silence without scale. Like the quiet of dawn, but impossibly amplified. Then a column of light broke from the giving mouth, upward out of what remained of the tower. It seared the clouds and arched across the mineral night, spreading faster than any eye could follow. Light. Changing everything. My own senses were blasted as I fell backward and away.

The Giving Mouth widened and poured out sweetness. The Age Of The Great Beast ended as it began, but now it was dreams that spewed across the kingdom. The slagheaps were clothed in meadowgrass. Underworkers were washed from the Pits, beached at the edge of a forest that swayed. The rooks preened their plumage to blue and circled the rising sun. Castleiron crumbled and silver fish leaped in the crystal moat. The Great Beast closed its jaws forever over the queen set in her iron throne, then shivered to sparkling dust. Everything was remade.

I stumbled with everyone else amid the wreckage and beauty on that first morning. I opened my eyes to blue sky. Warm sweet air danced against my face. I climbed to my feet in a ruin, greengold with bricks and ivy. I wandered through an orchard and marveled at the tall four-legged beasts that whinnied and tossed their manes in the sunlight and blossom. When all had settled and the morning had arrived in full, I found my mother. Her hair was lifting in the breeze and she looked younger than I could ever remember. She was kneeling in a filigree of flowers. Nearby, a stream was chattering diamonds. White clouds chased shadows across the rolling green. She was looking around in wonder. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

I embraced her and cried, too.

I could tell you much more; the end of my particular tale is just a beginning. But you probably know more than I about the wonders of this world. And I pray that the truth of its origins do not sour it for you.

Now that I strain my weary eyes, I can tell from your face that you hear me without comprehension. You still see only this crochety old king. You frown as you watch me smoking these leaves that grow so sweetly in the herb garden and yet taste so bitter on the tongue. You puzzle over

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my habits as you puzzle over my sudden angry moods. But eventually you always turn away and smile and shake your head. You put them down to age. You try to understand, but the wonders of adventure always beckon. On banquet days you sit at my right hand beside this throne set inside the yellowed teeth of this Giving Mouth that even now wafts the sweet air of Paradise against your face and stirs the hair around your noble brow. My chosen successor, you are handsome and proud, wise in the ways of goodness. You look out of that window and see the sweetdark river, forests and meadows tumbling like kites in a dream. You sleep soft and long, and morning is always a surprise. Your days are bright with color. And you smile with your pretty ones at these stories of times when this kingdom was cursed. Such tales as are only fit for firelight and the brimming comforts of red wine.

My time is not long. For today, you have heard enough. But soon, before the trees turn to fire and my joints become intolerable, I must take your hand and you must help me down the forgotten stairways of this tower. There, in the deepest quietest recesses, where the candles glow and I have decreed that there will be nothing but gold and incense, I will show you a wonder that you will never believe. A beautiful girl who has slept though my life and will sleep beyond yours. Her hands steepled in repose. The green eyes of her smile caught inside dreams beyond anything that even this world will ever show.

And you will let her sleep, for no one would dare to wake her. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Our next issue is a very special one, because April is our fourteenth anniversary (and since I was around, working on the magazine—although in a somewhat different capacity—on the very first issue, fourteen years ago, boy, does *that* make *me* feel old!), and we're celebrating with a huge Double-Length Anniversary issue. This immense issue is jam packed with as many stories and features as we could get into it, both by Big Name Professionals and hot new

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stars, and I don't see how you could possibly get more first-rate material (or a greater range of different *kinds* of writing in one package) for the money anywhere else—the two huge novellas alone are about the length of an average paperback novel, at less than the usual cost of most books on the shelf today, and with everything *else* in the issue thrown in as well! The cover is by Gary Freeman, celebrating, in an appropriate fashion, fourteen years of *IAsfm* (fourteen years! Oh my God!).

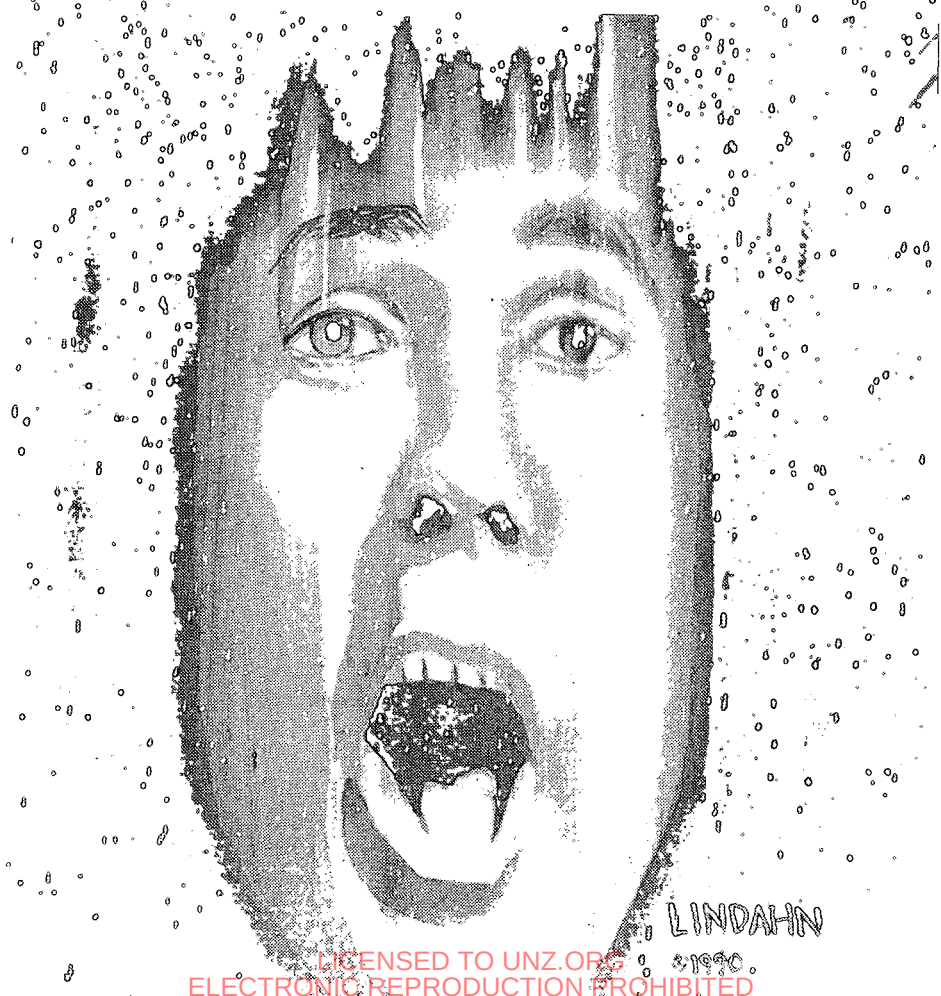
Also appropriately, the top of our April bill of fare is headed by **Isaac Asimov,** the Good Doctor himself, who serves up a brand-new Robot story, the disturbing saga of a robot who makes an immense and epic journey through time, only to return with some unsettling "Robot Visions." Next, Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress** takes us to the *near* future for a hard-edged, provocative look at the social consequences of difference, and what it could mean to us all that there are "Beggars in Spain"—this is one of the strongest novellas I've seen in some while, one of Kress's best pieces of work (which is high praise indeed), and will probably be one of the major stories of the year. Hugo-winner **Mike Resnick** is also on hand for April with another major story, and another big novella, taking us back to the beginning of the twentieth century and to a mostly unexplored (by the Europeans, anyway) Africa that was still the "Dark Continent," a strange and mysterious place where even the formidable Teddy Roosevelt may find that he has bitten off more than he can chew, in the compelling Alternate Worlds story "Bully!"

ALSO IN APRIL: Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Kim Stanley Robinson** gives us a searing look at "A History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations," a bleak and powerful story that may leave you nervously wondering what the *next* century holds in store; popular new writer **Greg Egan** takes us deep into space to reveal the strange secrets that are to be found "In Numbers"; new writer **Mark Van Name,** editor of the semiprozine *Short Form,* makes his *IAsfm* debut with a wry portrait of a hip young kid who's like, you know, *really* into television, in the biting "TV Time"; respected British author **Ian Watson,** one of science fiction's premier idea-men, returns a compelling tale that mixes interstellar intrigue with "The Odor of Cocktail Cigarettes"; **Paul Witcover** offers us the bittersweet story of a boy's curious coming-of-age, in "Lighthouse Summer"; new writer **Lawrence Person** returns with the bizarre and unsettlingly funny (as long as it's not happening to *you)* story of an ordinary man who tries to lead an ordinary life, but keeps getting the "Details" wrong; **S.N. Dyer** takes us on a harrowing and profoundly disturbing visit to "The July Ward"; and new writer **David Ira Cleary,** making his *IAsfm* debut, takes us to a far planet for a fast-paced study of the difficulties and deadly dangers that must be overcome if you want to "Build a Tower to the Sky." Plus our usual columns and features. Look for our immense April issue on sale on your newsstands on March 5, 1991.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This 1990 John W. Campbell Award-winning author recently sold two novels to New American Library. One, *The White Mists of Power*, is a fantasy that will appear sometime this year. The other, *Afterimage*, was written in collaboration with Kevin J. Anderson. Ms. Rusch is also the editor at Pulphouse Publishing. She and her colleague, Dean Wesley Smith, won the 1989 World Fantasy Special Award Nonprofessional for their work there.

art: Ron and Val Lakey Lindahn



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Greta held the railing tightly and peered over the edge. Twenty years ago, he had fallen from here, fallen, fallen, spiraling slowly until he landed five stories below with a thud that echoed through the yard. She had clutched her hands together, squeezing them, trying to erase the feel of his silk shirt against her palms, thinking that for someone as graceful as Karl, falling should have seemed like flying.

At least he hadn't screamed.

"Greta!"

She jumped, her breath caught in her throat. Timothy pulled open the glass doors and crossed the balcony.

"You shouldn't be out here," he said. "You'll catch your death." Then he flushed in the deep, almost purplish way that seemed exclusive to redheads. "I mean that—"

"I know what you mean," Greta said. She ran her hands over the goosebumps on her bare shoulders. "It's cold out here."

He put his arm around her back, warming her as he led her inside. The mansion still had a musty, unused air. Half of the company stretched out in the sunken living room. Long, graceful bodies reclined on the white sofas. Too many bare feet, with their corns, bunions and bandages, rested on footstools. She always saw the bodies first. Her dancers were less human and more instruments to her.

Timothy closed the glass door. Sebastian glanced up from his place in the corner, his arm around the new brunette, Amanda Thigopolos. He was trying to get Greta's attention by playing at jealousy. She concentrated instead on the brunette. The girl was perhaps eighteen, just out of high school, and could dance as if she had been born in toe shoes. Amanda was fine. Thigopolos had to go—too long and too Greek. She could shorten it when she had her own name on the program. Thigopolos would be fine as long as she was part of the *corps de ballet.*

"I assume you're all settled," Greta said. The company turned to her as a unit. Faces—white, black, and brown, circles under most eyes and skin grey with pain—stared at her. Pain was part of being a dancer. She had learned that from Karl. *Ballet is impossible,* he would say. *Pain is a small price for doing the impossible.* She ignored the evidence of the dancers' exhaustion and overwork, and glared at them. "This isn't Sunday. I didn't say we would have the day off. Class in two hours."

They groaned. Dale sewed a knot on his shoe, bit the thread and gave the needle back to Katrina. Lisa rubbed her feet. Sebastian frowned at Greta. She ignored him. "Well?" she said. They stood, stretched, and left the room in a jumbled line caught at the door, looking like a company on the first day of rehearsal season instead of one that had been together nearly six months. She sighed and pushed back the scarf covering her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

greying black hair. No. The hair was silvering, not greying. She was growing old elegantly, as Karl predicted she would.

Karl. He filled the room. She could almost catch the scent of his cologne, rich and overpowering, like Karl himself. Sometimes she thought she saw him out of the corner of her eye. Six feet tall and too thin, his leg muscles nearly bulging out of his jeans, his hair silver, and his brown eyes blazing. She remembered those eyes mostly in anger, never in repose. Anger, and that deep fierce hunger he seemed to have for her, the hunger she had once thought would consume her.

"Sorry you came?"

Timothy. She had forgotten about him. He stood next to her, as he always had, protecting her and backing her, the silent partner who liked to remain silent.

"It's the fiftieth anniversary of the company," she said. "It's only fitting that we do the anniversary performance here."

The words were by rote. She had said them ever since she had decided to return to Grayson Place. Usually the answer satisfied Timothy, but this time, he touched her arm. "I was asking about you, Greta."

She nodded. She remembered calling Timothy on the phone by the fireplace, her hands shaking so that she could barely dial. *Karl's dead,* she had said. *Did you call the police?* Timothy asked. *I want you to,* she said. Always there, always beside her, from the trial to the fight to save the company and onward, always caring about her and never asking for himself.

"I think that if we are going to keep the place, we'll have to redecorate." She reached across the table beside her and touched the rounded lamp-base. Its garish brown and orange glass was the height of sixties tastelessness. "It feels as if time has stopped here."

"Maybe it has," Timothy said, and in his eyes she saw Karl, falling, falling, reaching out to her as he spun, his shirt fluttering in the wind, his gaze on her, strong as Karl himself, pulling part of her with him.

She shivered. That had been twenty years ago. She ran her hands along her upper arms. The goosebumps were still there. Timothy put his arms around her, but she ducked out of his grasp.

"Class in two hours," she said, smiling slightly. "And I want to eat."

ii

Timothy watched her leave. Greta still moved like a young girl. Up close, though, her body gave her away. Her skin was wrinkling, softly, adding an elegance to her features, but the elegance was one of age. She

SCANNED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was old for a dancer, especially one who still practiced the art, but she was strong.

Greta was strong.

Timothy turned toward the balcony. Even now, he could feel the chill from that night. It had been cold when Karl died. Near freezing, although it was spring. When Timothy arrived, he found Greta, her hands shaking, still hovering near the phone. He had walked through the open glass doors, past the plastic patio furniture with its fringed umbrellas, past the deck chairs, Karl's portable record player and the small television set where they had watched the *Wizard of Oz* because Karl loved watching Ray Bolger dance. The concrete structure seemed almost a mile long and Timothy walked it inch by agonizing inch, knowing that when he reached the wrought iron railing, he would have to look down.

The railing still seemed to vibrate, but the trembling was caused by the cold and his own fear. Timothy touched the iron gently.

The imitation gaslight on the courtyard four-and-a-half stories below illuminated Karl's mangled, twisted body. Karl, who had never made an ungraceful motion in his life, looked like a young boy who had tried his first *tour en l'air,* tripped, fallen, and refused to try again. Timothy wanted to whisper, "Get up, Karl, it's all right," but he knew that Karl would never get up and everything would not be all right. Karl had died, and, in the living room, Greta washed her hands together like Lady Macbeth.

Timothy shivered. He'd tried to argue with Greta when she wanted to return to Grayson Place, but she wouldn't listen. She wanted to do the anniversary event, wanted to do it here, and nothing he could say would change her mind.

She hadn't been back to Grayson Place since the night Karl died. Even though she had inherited the mansion with Karl's estate, she had let Timothy take care of it. He rented it out to friends and dancers, keeping it in constant use, but he hadn't returned either. Not since the night he had decided to lie for her, the night before he first spoke to Greta's attorney, two weeks after Karl died and almost a year before Timothy actually testified at the murder trial.

"Mr. Masson?"

The brunette, the new one, the one Sebastian was dallying with, stood at the door. Timothy frowned, but couldn't recall her name.

"My room is cold," she said.

The whole place is cold, Timothy thought, but said, "The thermostat is on the baseboard heaters. You'll have to turn it up."

"It's up all the way and the heaters are warm." She shrugged. "But the room itself is freezing."

Timothy sighed inwardly. More and more, managing this company

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

meant playing nursemaid. If he were a little more trusting, he would hire someone to do this part of the job, the road work, and the day-by-day scheduling. He smiled. Trusting had nothing to do with it. He couldn't leave Greta.

"Where's your room?" he asked.

"Third floor, last one on the left."

Greta's old room. Timothy didn't know why his heart started knocking at his ribcage. He followed the girl up the stairs, remaining one step behind her. Her long hair smelled of floral shampoo and he could see the muscles that had already developed into hardened lumps along her legs and arms.

The third floor was filled with light conversation, some laughter. A few doors were open, dance bags sprawled in the hall, leotards hanging over doorknobs.

As he passed one room, he heard a woman gasp. The door swung closed before he could look. He hadn't really wanted to look anyway. He had seen it all before—twenty-five years of before.

"Hey, Amanda's doing the casting couch school of dance," someone called from a half-open doorway.

The girl in front of him blushed a little, but kept walking. Timothy admired that. She had guts. She. Amanda. Timothy repeated the name in his head so that he would remember. Amanda. Amanda the Greek, the one whose last name Greta hated.

"Right here," the girl said. She stood to the side of the door in the last room, the one under the eaves.

Timothy stepped inside. The room was cold. Ice cold. Or perhaps the chill from the living room had returned. He hadn't been in this room in over twenty years. Not since the night (*he and Greta had made love in the big double bed under the slanting ceiling. He had scraped his back against the drywall and hadn't cared because he was with Greta. Everything was fine with Greta*) Karl had called Greta from the room. Timothy didn't know until the next morning that she had gone to Karl's bed, although he should have guessed, should have known. Karl, the great dancer who had become an even greater choreographer. Greta used to breathe his name when she spoke it: *Karl says . . . Karl wants . . . Karl believes . . .*

"I'm being silly, right?" the girl asked.

Timothy spun, half expecting to see Greta at the door. Amanda looked like Greta—tall, slim with long, dark hair. But there the resemblance ended. Greta hadn't looked that young, that innocent for twenty years. "No," he said. "There's a definite draft. We'll have to move you to another part of the wing."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's okay," Amanda said. "I kind of like the room and it's only for a couple of days. I don't mind staying here."

I mind, Timothy thought. He crouched, touching the baseboard heaters. They were hot and the air coming through the outduct was warm. The chill seemed to be something that the heat couldn't dissipate, like an iceberg with its own refrigerator unit. "The heat's on. I could call someone—"

"No." The girl shrugged. "I'm not going to be in here much anyway. All I need is a few extra blankets."

"All right." Timothy left the room. The hallway felt like a sauna. Tension rippled off his back. He had been wrong coming to Grayson. There were as many memories here for him as there were for Greta. Perhaps more. "I'll see to it that the house staff brings up some blankets."

If the house staff was fully together. Timothy sighed. He had too much work to do. He wouldn't even get to watch class. Sometimes he wished that he hadn't stopped dancing. The pain and the constant physical exhaustion seemed easier to deal with than the myriad of tiny details that commanded his attention all day.

He walked down the hall, wondering how badly it would hurt the anniversary performance if he simply flew home.

iii

Greta felt as if she were twenty years old as she walked these stairs. They hadn't changed much. The white carpet had been pressed by too many feet, its nap matted and turned downward. The wooden railing had a newly polished feel. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine Karl waiting for her in the practice room.

She used to love to be near him, couldn't wait to touch him. The scent of his cologne used to send shivers down her back. But that had been in the early days, the first days. He continued to demand things of her, twist her to fit his shape, and she realized that nothing she ever did would be right for Karl.

Bend, Greta. Arch—no, no, no, with finesse. Goddammit, girl, you could be a real dancer if you used that body of yours. Now, bend. No, like this . . .

It had grown worse after she had become his prima ballerina, the star of his company, and had moved in with him here at Grayson. Sometimes he would get her up in the middle of the night to try a new movement or run through a variation that had come to him in a dream. She had been always tired, aching, dancing with a constant pain in her left ankle, but that hadn't been the worst of it. The worst of it had been the choreography.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She took a deep breath to ease the tension from herself and then rounded the corner. The dance wing of Grayson Place had been hidden back in the trees. When Karl built Grayson, he had been afraid that rival choreographers would send spies, that dance critics would try to see his works before the premiere. So the dance wing had no windows. Pines and overgrowth protected the outside. No one could get to the auditorium and practice rooms without coming through the center of the mansion.

This wing had stayed closed after Karl died, but someone had cleaned it, polished it. Greta could remember when the white walls held dozens of sweaty fingerprints and long black slashes from brushes with dirty dance bags. Down here, she felt at home.

She walked into the practice room. Dancers were already parading in front of the mirror on the far wall. Mike, the rehearsal pianist, played random chords, checking to see if the piano was tuned. The floor glistened. Several dancers warmed up along the barre. Some stretched along the floor, while still others sat on the sides, sewing shoes and wrapping ankles. The room smelled of sweat and medicated lotion.

Greta didn't announce her presence. She went up behind Amanda and held the girl's waist to straighten her. No wonder Sebastian flirted with her. Her skin was smooth and supple, and she moved easily. Greta grabbed Amanda's right arm and bent it above the girl's head. "Your movements have to be softer," Greta said.

Sebastian was watching her. She couldn't read his dark eyes. She was growing tired of him. She was growing tired of all the young men. She hadn't had a lover older than twenty-four in nearly two decades. It was time to stop hiding behind their responsive skin and quicksilver moods, time to take a real risk in a relationship again.

She knew that Timothy was waiting for that.

"As usual," she said. "*Battement tendu.*"

Mike began the *battement tendu* music. Dancers slid into fifth position, feet touching and the heel of the right foot in front of the left toe. Then they extended one leg, moving the toe forward until it touched the floor directly in front of the body. Greta watched, seeing the differences in movement, the variations in style. The dancers slid their left foot back and then to the side, slid the foot back and behind. The movements seemed to take only a fraction of a second, but Greta saw each one.

"Sebastian," she said. "You're sloppy. Head up."

He didn't look at her, but continued watching the mirror as she instructed them through *battement tendu jeté.* Small thuds echoed as feet slapped against the floor. Greta walked over to Sebastian, and kicked his left foot into place. "Don't look down," she said. He frowned.

They moved to the *battement frappé, battement fondu, rond de jambe.*

DIGITIZED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The smell of sweat grew. Greta watched them, adjusted an arm here, a leg there. Finally she clapped her hands and the music stopped.

"Sebastian only. *Grand battement,*" she said. The dancers near Sebastian moved away. Under Greta's command, he brought his foot forward into a high extension. "Stay," she said.

He held the position, leg at a hundred and thirty degree angle in front of him. His entire body started to tremble and his mouth opened into a small "o."

"Go on," Greta said. He moved down into a deep *plié* with one leg, the other in front. "Stay." She stopped beside him. "Messy, Sebastian. Your line isn't clean."

"What are you doing?" he whispered. Sweat rolled down the bridge of his nose and dropped to the floor. His body was still trembling.

She didn't answer. "Finish," she said. He slipped his legs back into fifth position. Then he stood, bent over, and clutched the back of his knees, stretching and taking deep breaths. Greta put her hand on his back. She could feel the ridges of his spine beneath her palms. "You're breathing too hard. Your posture's bad and you look as if you are thinking about your feet. You're lazy, Sebastian."

"Why are you singling me out?" he whispered. "What are you doing, Greta?"

A thread of anger traced its way through her stomach. If she hadn't slept with him, he would never have asked the question. She was Madame, the head of the company, and no one was supposed to question her.

"I am conducting class." She clapped her hands. "Whole group."

The dancers returned to the barre. She started again: *battement tendu, tendu jeté, frappé, fondu, rond de jambe.* But she wasn't watching the dancers. In her mind, she could see Karl moving among the dancers, yanking an arm out, extending a leg. One of the dancers exclaimed as if in pain, but Greta kept them moving.

"How much longer you want to repeat this pattern?" Mike asked. His voice had an edge to it, as if he had asked the question more than once.

Greta's heart was pounding. She didn't want to stay in the practice room any longer. If she did, the ghost of Karl's memory would have her out there, moving through her paces like she had moved Sebastian. Like she had moved Sebastian. Singling out one dancer had been Karl's trick. Karl had always done that to her as his way of proving that she was not his favorite.

Her stomach twisted and for a moment, she thought she was going to be sick. She clapped her hands and the dancers stopped. "Lead class, Katrina," Greta said and walked out of the room.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sebastian stood under the shower, letting the hot water caress his tired muscles, soothe his aching legs. He opened his mouth and listened to the droplets tap against his throat. The water tasted slightly of rust, but he didn't care. He frowned, remembering the odd note of command in Greta's voice. *Stay . . . Go on . . . Stay . . .*

A bar of soap hit him in the back and skated across the tile. Sebastian spit the water out of his mouth and turned. Dale hung a fluffy blue towel he had stolen from the Hyatt on the peg beside his shower. "Get this," he said. "A shower room in a house."

"This isn't a house," Sebastian said. His back muscles twitched where the soap had hit him. "It's a goddamn fortress."

"No shit. Not even the American Ballet Theater has facilities this good."

"The American Ballet Theater didn't have several hundred million dollars *and* Karl Grayson." Sebastian picked the soap off the floor, rubbed the bar between his hands until it lathered and then began scrubbing his chest.

"I wonder why we don't use this place more."

Sebastian's hands had moved to his belly. The last three nights before they had come to Grayson, Greta had screamed *Nooooo!* in her sleep and then had said, a few minutes later, in a very flat voice, *Karl is dead, Timothy.* Her entire body would shake and when Sebastian tried to ease her into wakefulness, she would scream again. "Grayson died here," he said.

"So? Someone afraid it's haunted?" Dale ducked his head under the nozzle, spraying water in several directions.

Maybe for Greta it is, Sebastian thought, but said nothing. He finished soaping his legs, then moved to his feet. He had a new pain, almost like a bruise, between the first and second toes of his right foot.

"Madame was sure a bitch today, wasn't she?" Dale shook the water from his hair. "You gonna share that soap?"

Sebastian stood up. He tossed the bar as hard as he could, hitting Dale in the stomach. The soap bounced off and skittered away, as it had after it hit him. "I don't think Greta likes it here."

"Greta, Greta, Greta," Dale mimicked as he went for the soap. "I don't think she's too happy with you either."

"Yeah." Sebastian frowned. Greta's voice seeped back up to him. *Stay . . . Go on . . . Finish . . .*

"I think maybe you should keep your hands off that little girl for a couple of days and maybe Madame will let you dance like the rest of us."

DOWNLOADED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah," Sebastian said, but he wasn't really listening. Amanda wasn't the problem. Greta didn't get jealous, not in the normal way. She knew that no one compared with her, knew that Sebastian needed a little adulation too.

She only got angry when his dalliances became disrespectful and this one wasn't even close yet. No. Something else was bothering her. Something she hadn't told him about.

Sebastian shut off the shower. He wrapped a towel around his waist, sloshed across the tile and tiptoed onto the icy concrete floor lining the dressing room. He would ignore Amanda tonight and he would talk with Greta. Maybe then he would know what was really going on.

v

Greta looked at the long, polished wood table in the dining room. Four white tapered candles flickered along its length. Twenty places, set with bone china, ran along the sides. One place had been set at the head. Greta stared at it. Her place now. She was head of this company. She sat in Karl's chair.

She had never really realized it before. She had been sitting in Karl's chair since the trial and since Timothy had found an attorney good enough to settle the estate. But she had never before let herself think about what sitting in Karl's place actually meant.

Bowls and empty wine glasses sat on the serving board behind the table. The dark red curtains were closed, blocking the view of the lake. Karl would have left the curtains open to watch the moonlight reflected on the waters.

She shook her head. That was wrong. He used to do that when they were alone. When the company was in residence here, the curtains remained closed so that no one would be distracted from Karl's petty games and speeches.

The smell of roast beef dominated the food scents coming from the kitchen. Greta's mouth watered. As she aged, she let herself eat things like red meat again, but she knew most of the company wouldn't touch the stuff.

Dancers were vegetarians, usually, trying to keep the calories down so that the body remained thin. She was thin and almost always cold—especially here, in this place. Thin, but strong. The muscles in her arms and legs were as powerful as they had been when she was twenty-four. When Karl had died.

Laughter echoed in the hallway. Greta started and turned away from the empty table. She didn't want to be down here when the company

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

arrived. She wanted to make an entrance, to command their attention. That too was like Karl, but she couldn't care. Many things she would do here would remind her of Karl. They had to. She had gotten her start in Karl's company. He had been her first choreographer and the head of her first dance troupe. She had been in others, during and after the trial, but none were as well-run as Karl's. She had adopted many of his techniques in her own. It was no wonder that here, in his home, she would remember that.

She went into the kitchen. A man dressed in a white chef's uniform placed broccoli florets on a bed of rice. A woman opened the long oven and pulled out the beef. On the other oven, over to the side, another woman set stuffed mushroom caps on a serving plate.

Once before, Greta had come through the kitchen to escape the dining room. Only that night, she had been escaping Karl and Timothy arguing over her. Timothy had been young then, and very hotheaded. The perfect male dancer, Karl used to say, temperamental, passionate, and very precise. It had been her relationship with Karl that had driven Timothy from the dance. And it had been Karl's death that brought Timothy back into that world.

She pushed open the other door and went up the back stairs to her room. Timothy had placed her in the guest bedroom suite, thoughtfully keeping her away from Karl's old room. She checked her appearance in the mirror.

Her skin was too pale and the shadows beneath her eyes were too deep. The long burgundy shirt dress that she wore open over her black silk camisole gave her additional height. The matching burgundy pants creased over the arch of her foot. If no one looked at her face, she appeared important, expensive, and powerful.

Then why was it that she felt like a trapped little girl again? The mansion brought back all of her helplessness, all of her rage. She clenched her fists together. Her fingertips were cold.

A sharp rap on the door startled her and she nearly cried out. She whirled around, staring at the door's mahogany surface.

"Greta?"

It was Sebastian.

"Can we talk?"

She glanced at the gold watch on her left wrist. "Dinner is in less than fifteen minutes, Sebastian."

"I know. This won't take long."

She sighed and pulled the door open. He looked wonderful. Sebastian, the company's star, in a black satin tuxedo that lengthened his shoulders and tapered his already thin hips into nearly nothing. She felt a heat on her cheeks as she stood away from the door. "Come on in."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He bent over to kiss her and she turned her head so that his lips brushed her cheek. "You're stunning," he said.

"Thank you." She pulled away from him and walked to the table near the window. She put her hands on the leather armchair, indicating where he should sit. He ignored her.

"What happened this afternoon?" he asked.

The male animal in its youth. So proprietary. He let her lead him in the dance, but once the doors were closed, he seemed to think he was in charge. "You mean because I worked you harder in class than you've been worked in a long time? You're the headline star, the one who supposedly draws the crowds. If you can't dance at command, then the entire company is in trouble."

Sebastian ran a hand through his dark brown hair, leaving it slightly messy, making him look rakish and even more handsome than before. "It's not that," he said. "It's a lot of things. You don't seem like yourself."

So he had noticed that. He was more observant than she gave him credit for. She turned her back on him and looked out the window. Tall pine trees swished softly in the wind. She had been paying so much attention to the mansion itself that she had hardly noticed what was going on outside it.

"You don't know what *myself* is, little boy," she said and heard Karl in the words. He had been standing in the dining room, his hands tucked in the pockets of his jeans. *You don't understand me at all, Greta,* he'd said. *And why should you? To you, I am Oz, The Great and Terrible, and I am afraid that when you pull back that curtain and see that I am, in truth, a little old man without magic powers, but with the wisdom brought by age and experience, you will walk away, not realizing that wisdom is infinitely more valuable than illusion.*

"I know you well enough to know that you're on edge and upset."

She snorted and leaned on the chair she had been holding. Upset didn't describe how she was feeling. She hadn't been in the place since Karl died—Timothy had taken care of all of the arrangements—and she was feeling frightened. "I don't like it here."

"Then why did we come back?"

"To do the anniversary performance." She looked down at her short, stubby fingernails. Even the burgundy nail polish couldn't hide the fact that, at forty-four, she still bit her nails.

Sebastian put a finger under her chin and lifted her face to his. He smelled faintly of cologne. "What's the real reason, Greta?"

She could see the brown flecks in his irises, the way his lashes turned upwards, and the tiny creases near the lids which narrowed his eyes and made his concern obvious.

The real reason. What was the real reason that she had returned to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Grayson Place? The anniversary performance could have been held in New York. They would have had a less exclusive crowd, but a larger one. Something Karl had said. Something, the night before he died—

She shrugged to shake the memory away. "I don't really know," she said and to her surprise, tears lined her eyes. Sebastian slipped her in his arms. His body felt firm against hers, the satin warm against her skin.

"Stay with me tonight," she whispered. The words came from the little girl, the one who seemed a part of this place, the girl who was afraid to be alone.

Sebastian kissed the crown of her head. "I'll be here," he said.

vi

Amanda's mouth watered. The food smelled wonderful—roast beef, gravy, cheese-covered vegetables, and fresh bread. She hadn't eaten well since she had quit her waitressing job to join the company. An apple and scrambled eggs often served for all three meals. Dancers were supposed to be slim, but not anorexic. She watched the caterers carry the appetizers through the swinging doors. Amanda wondered how much she could eat without making herself sick.

Someone touched her shoulder. Amanda looked up. Katrina smiled at her. "Nice dress."

Amanda blushed. It wasn't a nice dress. Madame had insisted on formal attire for dinner and all Amanda owned was her prom dress. She felt silly in a clingy, strapless gown that had seemed elegant in her high school gymnasium a year ago, but now seemed out of place and childish. Katrina, the petite principal dancer who had been with the company for six years, wore a bone ivory blouse over black silk pants. "You look beautiful," Amanda said.

Katrina handed Amanda a fluted glass filled with wine. "The secret to looking beautiful," Katrina whispered, "is to be comfortable. Everyone looks ridiculous in evening clothes. Look at Dale."

Amanda glanced across the room. Dale stood near the window, deep in conversation with Lisa. He constantly ran his finger around the neck of his shirt as if it were too tight, and when he leaned forward, she could see the cummerbund bunch around his narrow waist. She glanced back at Katrina, who smiled. "The imperfections are always there," Katrina said. "The secret is to pretend that no one will notice them. You really do look lovely."

She touched Amanda's arm and then walked away. Amanda took a deep breath. She looked lovely. Katrina's words gave her a sense of power.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Timothy took an appetizer off one of the trays as a signal that the food was available for consumption. Several other dancers picked items off the trays. Amanda walked over to the countertop. Stuffed mushroom caps, vegetables and dip, crackers and a dozen varieties of cheese—there was enough food here to last her for an entire week. She set down her wine, grabbed a napkin, and filled it. Her stomach rumbled.

"I love these things. I can always tell who starves themselves for art."

Amanda nearly dropped the napkin, but Timothy placed a hand beneath hers. "Careful," he said. "You can't let all that food go to waste."

His palm was warm and his eyes understanding. She smiled to hide the blush that was returning to her cheeks. "Thanks," she said.

"Is your room still so cold?"

She nodded. The goosebumps were just now beginning to recede. She had felt, as she slipped into her gown, as if she were changing clothes on a ski slope.

"I think maybe we should move you, then."

"No." The word escaped before she had a chance to think about it. Despite the chill, she liked the room. It reminded her of her bedroom back home, with the slanting ceilings and a view of the pines.

Timothy shrugged. "All right," he said.

She put a mushroom cap in her mouth. Her stomach grumbled appreciatively. The cap had been stuffed with spinach, cream cheese, onions, and various spices, the mushroom itself sauteed in garlic and butter. Food had never tasted so good.

Then Timothy stiffened beside her. She followed his gaze.

Sebastian stood in the doorway, his arm protectively around Greta. Madame wore her hair in a topknot, strands framing her face, making her look younger and more vulnerable. Sebastian was watching her, and even from across the room, Amanda could see the love, admiration, and concern on his face.

She swallowed the mushroom cap. It felt like a lump in her throat. Suddenly she became conscious of the dress, her ragged haircut, and her inexpertly applied make-up. She started inching her way to the kitchen, but Timothy grabbed her elbow.

"Stay here," he said softly.

She looked up at him and saw her feelings reflected in his eyes. Only the feelings were deeper, older. She felt somthing flutter in her stomach, a sense of kinship, perhaps, and then she looked away.

Amanda watched as Sebastian led Madame through the room. What was there to love about that woman? She was beautiful, yes. Her thinness made her eyes wider and gave her a power that seemed to belong only to Eastern European women. She moved with a grace and strength that all dancers had. But beneath that exquisite surface, Madame was cold.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She had never said a kind word to Amanda in six months with the company, and the way she had treated Sebastian in class had bordered on nasty. When Amanda had gotten the job with the company, her roommates had warned her about Madame, saying that she was the cruelest choreographer in the business. She demanded perfection. But her company attracted crowds because she usually achieved it.

Madame made her way through the room, stopping to talk with an occasional dancer. Her movements seemed less fluid than usual, more brittle, and Sebastian's expression reflected a concern that Amanda had never seen. She shouldn't be feeling so out of place and jealous. She had known from the first that his main affection was for Madame. But Amanda had thought that the affection would die when he turned his attention to someone more reasonable. Once he had gotten to know her.

Being a professional dancer didn't stop childish daydreams. She took a deep breath. Timothy squeezed her arm. She nodded, as if to tell him that she would stay.

Madame took her place at the head of the table. Sebastian sat at her right. The rest of the company brought their drinks and picked seats. Timothy kept his hold on Amanda's elbow. He led her to the chair beside his, to the left of Madame.

Sebastian nodded at her. His eyes held no apology. It was as if he didn't see her. Perhaps he never had. Amanda's stomach tightened. The servers placed a large plate of roast beef in the center of the table, two gravy bowls, potatoes, but the food had lost its appeal. She could feel Timothy watching her.

He leaned over, placed his hand on her bare back in a gesture of familiarity. "You have to eat," he whispered. "You have to smile and you have to enjoy yourself."

The words were kind and she knew their basic truth. If she had problems with Madame, Amanda would have to leave. A thousand dancers lived in New York, but the company had only one Madame.

Timothy took his hand from Amanda's back. Shivers ran up and down her spine. He handed her the platter of roast beef. The china was warm. She took two slices and passed the platter on.

"It's cold," Madame said.

Amanda looked at the other woman. Deep circles ran under Madame's eyes and, up close, her face seemed drawn and pale.

"I'll see if they can turn up the heat." Timothy put his napkin on the table.

Madame covered his hand with her own. "I don't think this has anything to do with the heat, Timothy."

Something seemed to pass between them, some knowledge that Amanda didn't catch. Timothy nodded. He grabbed a spoon and loaded

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his plate with broccoli and rice. Then he picked up Amanda's plate and did the same.

She turned her attention to the meal as, all around her, the room grew colder.

vii

Karl sat on the balcony railings, one ankle resting on his knee, his hands on his thighs. He was talking to her, but Greta couldn't hear him. A chill, light breeze fluttered through her hair. Her ankle ached and her muscles were sore. She was exhausted, physically and mentally. Tired of fighting. Tired of Karl.

Behind him, the tall silhouettes of the pine trees were blue in the darkness. Through the trees, she could see the moon shimmering against the surface of the lake. Then she realized that it wasn't the moon. It was the Northern Lights.

Karl was still talking, gesturing now. She still couldn't hear him. She didn't feel like a twenty-four-year-old woman. She felt fifty and defeated, her life over before it had begun, trapped here in this place, under this sky, these stars, with this man.

"Karl," she said, her voice low, husky, seductive.

He stopped talking and watched her. She stepped forward, hitting the heels of her hands against his chest, hitting him with such force that he fell over the rail, clutching for her and missing. She thought, in a second of clarity, that if he had grabbed the railing, he wouldn't have fallen. But she had applied the right pressure to the right place and he fell, spinning, his shirt fluttering, his hands reaching for her, until he landed against the flagstones of the patio with a crack that echoed through the yard. She grabbed the railing and leaned over. His body was twisted, unnaturally even for a dancer, and a dark stain was seeping across the pavement.

For a minute, she thought he was fooling, waiting until she ran across the pavement to grab her wrist and wrench it behind her back, to hurt her as much as she had hurt him. But he didn't move. He didn't call to her. He was dead.

The realization brought her—freedom. Freedom. She had to call Timothy.

Suddenly he was there beside her, holding her in the darkness. Not Timothy, but Sebastian. How did Sebastian get in her room? And then she remembered letting him in because the mansion frightened her.

"You were talking about Northern lights and calling for Timothy," he said. "Everything okay?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She swept her hair out of her face. The hair fell to the center of her back, wrapping her in warmth. The soft, shining smoothness of it had seemed like her only comfort with Karl. "Nightmare," she said.

"You've been having them a lot since we decided to come back here."

"We didn't decide," she said. "*I* did."

And then she knew what was wrong. Karl had said to her in the dark, his lean body against hers, his hands caressing the insides of her thighs, *What I want most is to come back here in twenty years, at the fiftieth anniversary of the company—*

Thirty-fifth for you, Greta had said.

He shrugged, waving it away. *We'll have a gala here, at Grayson, showcasing the best of the company. You'll be a choreographer then, Greta. . . .*

If I live that long, she thought.

. . . And we will make a small fortune on memories.

He had been talking about that when she pushed him. The thought of another twenty years with Karl, under his thumb, losing the best of herself to his wishes—

She shivered. Sebastian drew the blanket up. "Must have been some nightmare," he said.

She nodded, remembering Karl, the feel of his hands on her skin. "You ever have those dreams that start out scary and you turn them into something freer, more pleasant, and then they start to get scary again, only worse—?"

Her voice shook. She wasn't sure if she was talking about her dream or her life. Sebastian still held her, but his grip had loosened. "Should we leave?" he asked.

She laughed, but the laugh sounded forced. "Because of nightmares? Don't be silly."

He eased her back down on the pillow, running his hand through her hair as if she were the child, and she clung to him, thinking about what she would have to do to cancel the fiftieth anniversary gala. The ads were done, the promotion campaign had run for nearly two years. They were in the final stages. She couldn't pull the company away now without losing a fortune.

"We'll stay," she whispered against Sebastian's broad, furred chest. But, as she drifted off to sleep, she thought she heard Karl, laughing.

viii

Timothy sat on the bed, his hands clasped tightly together and shoved between his thighs for warmth. He waited for Amanda to return from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the bathroom. He wasn't supposed to be sitting on her bed. He was supposed to be investigating the room, seeing if he could find the source of the draft. But the room seemed warmer to him than it had before, and he wondered if perhaps the heaters had merely needed time to function properly. This entire wing had been closed off until a month ago. They should have expected more troubles than one room with poorly operating baseboard heaters.

He heard a movement in the hall and his heart started pounding again. He felt foolish, waiting here for a girl who could have been his daughter. It would be so easy to say that he had found nothing and leave her, pretending that the reason he had used to walk her to her room hadn't even existed. Easy, if it weren't for that expression she had worn when Greta entered the dining room with Sebastian. He knew that expression intimately; it was etched into the grooves of his face. Only he had let it eat at him, become part of him, as the betrayals were repeated over and over again. He wouldn't let that happen to this little girl.

Amanda. If he truly cared about her, he would use her name. Timothy stood up and tugged on the crease in his satin pants. He should go before he did more damage. He knew what it was like to be on the wrong end of a relationship. Amanda didn't need two men to teach her the same lesson.

Her door opened and he saw Greta there, the young Greta, the one he had fallen in love with. "Find anything?" she asked.

The voice was all Amanda, but it didn't entirely destroy the illusion. He saw two women, a ghostly one—the remembered one—superimposed on the real one.

"No," he said. He took her hand and brought her inside, closing the door behind her. Then he wrapped his arms around her, letting the light floral scent of her fill him. Her arms caressed his back, pulling him closer. He could feel the need in her grasp.

The room seemed warm, almost too warm, as he bent down to kiss her. Her hands found his hair, holding him, as their kissing grew more passionate. He slipped his fingers into her gown, unhooking the back, and it fell off her into a pile on the floor. She managed to unbutton him, free him, and he lifted her, her dark hair flowing over his arms, onto the bed.

He felt young again, a dancer again, strong and in love. As he entered her, his back scraped against the drywall, but the pain seemed worth it, worth this moment, Greta writhing beneath him, loving him as he loved her. Finally the pressure grew too much, the love too much, and he poured himself inside her, calling her name over and over, collapsing, sticky body against sticky body, his back aching and raw.

Something warm trickled against his ear. He pushed up onto his el-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bows. The girl's face looked back at him, mascara ringing her eyes and leaving black streaks down her cheeks.

"Jesus," he said. "Amanda." And his heart went out to her. He had made it worse. She had lost to Greta twice in one day. The chill returned, almost as if it left Amanda's body and seeped into the air around them.

"I'm sorry." Timothy buried his face into the hollow of her shoulder. Her skin was damp, but whether with tears or perspiration, he couldn't tell. "I'm so very sorry."

ix

Greta wrapped the velour robe tightly around herself. She grabbed her hair, shook it a little, and let it cascade down her back. Sebastian grunted, sighed, and rolled over. She glanced at the bed. He had a fist pressed against his cheek. He looked like an exhausted child who had fallen asleep in the middle of a ballet. Poor boy. She had kept him awake half of the night.

The dreams were getting worse. She had thought that she had put them past her after the trial, but since she decided to return to Grayson, Karl had re-entered her mind.

She opened the bedroom door and stepped into the hallway. It was dark, the thick grainy darkness that allowed her to see vague shapes. The carpet scratched her bare feet.

She had left her youth in this place. Karl wasn't the only thing that had died in the fall from the balcony. All of Greta's dreams had died with him. Funny that she had gone on to achieve them anyway. Here she was, a major choreographer, head of her own dance company, wealthy beyond what she had anticipated, and she felt empty.

Light filtered through the balcony doors, reflecting off the living room's white furniture. A too-full moon? Or the Northern Lights? She crossed the room, stubbing her toe against a table leg and wincing with pain. When she reached the balcony doors, she touched the glass. It was cold.

This was the center of the mansion to her, the place she could not get out of her mind. At the trial, the experts had presented life in this room as verbally abusive, and her response as that of a classic victim pushed too far. All she remembered was the rage, the blind pure hatred. When Karl mentioned the anniversary performance again, she realized that he would never let her go, never let her be free to dance for anyone else. He would continue to borrow her choreographic suggestions and never let her work on her own. Forever, she would be his plaything, his woman, Karl's Greta, something he had molded in his Svengali-like wisdom.

Her feet were cold.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She was standing on the concrete balcony, looking over the edge. She had been acquitted of the crime. The best defense attorney in New York had planted a reasonable doubt in the jury's mind—there was no real proof that Greta had killed Karl—that, and Timothy's willingness to lie for her, to say he was with her the entire time. She had been acquitted, everywhere but in her own mind.

And in this place.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled. Someone was on the balcony with her. She turned and saw something white and see-through shimmering near the patio table. Goosebumps rippled up her arm. The shimmering shape had a vaguely human form.

"Karl?" she whispered. Her entire body was one large heartbeat. Her hands were shaking and she felt vulnerable pressed up against the railing. Would he get his revenge by killing her?

The shape gained solidity. Hands, splayed and flat, stretched out to her. Greta stifled a scream and moved away from the edge, tripping and nearly falling forward. Arms grew from the hands' wrists, slender, muscular arms. The hands grabbed at Greta, but slipped through her, dousing her in cold mist. She shivered, backed away, then remembered the railing. She would not trip and fall to her death. If she did that, she would be trapped here, with Karl, forever. But Karl couldn't grab her. Karl had no strength.

She circled around, away from the hands, until her back pressed against the glass. She groped for the metal door handle and yanked on it. The door stuck for a moment. The hands came for her, dripping mist, dripping cold. Greta tugged. The door slid open and she fell through it onto the thick carpet.

The hands hovered in the darkness. Greta was breathing heavily. She swallowed, then whispered, "I'm sorry, Karl. Really. If there had been some other way—"

"Karl forgives you." The voice was husky, female. "But *I* don't."

Greta stood up. Her legs were shaking as if she were about to perform. She grabbed the balcony door and swung it shut with a bang.

The hands faded. Greta turned and ran out of the living room, her robe flying behind her. The room was safe. Her room was safe. Sebastian was there and he would awaken her, comfort her, make her forget.

She so needed to forget.

x

Sebastian's eyes felt rough and gritty. His entire body ached. At least Greta was sleeping now. She had come back to bed ice-cold, shivering,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and terrified. She wouldn't tell him what had scared her—perhaps that loud bang that had shaken him from sleep—and it took him the better part of an hour to calm her down. Then he slipped into a fitful doze, waking as sunlight spilled into the bedroom.

Food, some in trays hovering over sterno, had been laid out across the table, and used plates were stacked on the buffet. It looked as if most of the company was already awake. They were probably walking or in the practice room stretching. The only person left in the dining room was Timothy. Sebastian grabbed a plate and heaped it with scrambled eggs, sausages, and fruit. He poured himself some orange juice and sat down next to Timothy.

Timothy looked old this morning. His hair was tousled and lines creased his face. He didn't look up to acknowledge Sebastian, but continued staring into his coffee.

"Greta hardly slept at all last night," Sebastian said.

Timothy looked up. His eyes focused on Sebastian for the first time, and Sebastian realized that the man hadn't even known he was there. "What?" Timothy asked.

"I said Greta hardly slept last night. Nightmares. And they seem to be getting worse. I think she was sleep-walking."

"Wonderful." Timothy got up, grabbed the silver coffee pot, and poured more coffee in his cup.

"I don't think she should stay here."

Timothy sat back down. "I don't think any of us should." He shrugged. "But we're committed."

"Can't we at least get Greta out of here? This place isn't very healthy for her." Sebastian's hands were trembling. He had never been this direct with Timothy before.

"It's never been healthy for her. No reason it should change now."

Sebastian swallowed, feeling the frustration build. "I don't think she should stay here, Timothy."

"If the company stays, she stays. You know that."

"Then let's cancel the performance."

Timothy smiled, but the smile was wan. "We've spent too much time and too much money on this performance. We couldn't cancel it if we wanted to. It'll all be over tomorrow. I think we can all make it until then." He took a final sip of his coffee and stood up. Sebastian watched the other man leave. Timothy had never been that curt with him before. Perhaps it was the mention of Greta's night. It was clear even to the half-observant how Timothy felt about Greta.

Sebastian sighed and picked up his fork. Water from his eggs had congealed on the side of his plate. He pushed the plate away, grabbed an orange from the fruit basket and headed for the practice room.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Greta awoke to the feeling of hands around her throat. She touched her neck, but found nothing. Then she reached for Sebastian. He too was gone.

She sat up, her heart racing. It was a dream, nothing but a dream. But she knew it wasn't. As she dressed, she noted a loose flap of skin on the toe she had stubbed. Her velour robe was streaked with dirt. She had been on the balcony during the night—and something had been there with her.

She tied her hair up in a kerchief and glanced at the clock. She was running late. Class in fifteen minutes. She decided not to eat—eating would simply get in the way. She would go down and warm up with her dancers. Exercise would remove the crawlies from her skin. And the memory of that voice.

Karl forgives you.

I don't.

She had heard that voice before, but she couldn't place it. It had sounded half-familiar, like the speaking voice of a famous singer. She took a deep breath to calm herself. It was daylight. Ghosts didn't emerge in the daylight. And the performance was tomorrow. She could last that long.

But as she walked down the stairs to the rehearsal wing, she wondered. It felt as if something were stalking her, following her. Twice she stopped on the stairs only to hear a stair creak behind her. She turned, but saw nothing.

An overactive imagination, she told herself. *If it wasn't the ghost of Karl, who could it be?* She was safe as long as she remembered that the thing which tracked her was intangible, trying to get her to make her own mistakes so that she would die.

Most of the company was already in the practice room. Greta stretched and then took a place at the barre. Her legs hurt—she hadn't been working out as she usually did—but she forced herself to work anyway, putting herself through paces that she hadn't done in years. The woman's face gazing back at her from the mirror was too old, and then she remembered. This was what she used to do when she had had too much of Karl, or when the trial got too rough. She would bend and twist her body beyond human measure and let her mind dwell on the physical aches instead of the mental and emotional pain.

Timothy used to accuse her of willing the emotions away.

A flash in the mirror caught her eye. Something white, not quite solid. She whirled, nearly lost her balance and had to grip the thick wooden barre for support. Nothing. Nothing but dancers staring at themselves

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the mirror, stretching their bodies as she had stretched hers. Sebastian wasn't even here, so no white danskins appeared in the room.

Greta took a deep breath. She was tired and too tense. She always got this way at the end of the season. Add to that the stresses of the mansion and its memories, and it was no wonder she was spooked.

Spooked. She tucked herself into a *plié*, feeling the muscles in her legs tremble. She had killed Karl here, pushed him with all of her strength off the balcony. A *woman* should not be haunting her. The ghost in this place should have been Karl.

A cold hand touched her shoulder. Greta whirled. No one stood behind her.

"Are you all right, Madame?" Dale asked.

Greta nodded, feeling slightly foolish. "Are you cold?"

Dale smiled and wiped at his flushed face. "God, no. I think we could probably turn off the heat in this room."

She turned back and gripped the barre tightly, doing another *plié* and going down until her thighs were horizontal. She was the only one who felt the cold, the only one who saw the ghost. She had to handle this one all by herself.

xii

Amanda stood in the door of the practice room, watching Greta. The old woman moved with a perfection that Amanda's young body could not hope to achieve. Amanda rubbed her hands against her leotard. She was cold. She had been cold ever since she awakened, alone, Timothy gone. Timothy, with his cries of "Greta!" in what Amanda had hoped would be a moment of mutual comfort. Greta. Madame. The bitch.

Amanda dropped her dance bag beside all the others, taking in the familiar scents of sweat, leather, and lotion. She stretched, then rubbed powder on the inside of her shoes and took her place at the barre.

Madame whirled, her face pinched and frightened. She appeared to be looking for something, something she had seen. Amanda felt something touch her, cold hands running down her spine. For a minute she had the impression of a man falling, falling, spinning, his hands reaching out, and then she got dizzy as she followed him, clinging to him because he wouldn't let her go.

"You okay?" Katrina held her shoulders. Amanda blinked at the other dancer, still feeling off balance.

"I got dizzy for a minute."

"Sit down." Katrina led her to the side of the room. "You haven't been eating well, have you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Amanda started to deny it, but Katrina put up her hand. "I saw the way you ate last night. You can't cut out food. You need your strength for the dance."

Amanda nodded. Food wasn't what she needed. She needed to go somewhere warm. The cold had settled in the pit of her belly like a little iceberg fetus. She frowned, remembering the rush of chill air past her ears and the feeling of falling. "I'll be all right," she said.

"Okay." Katrina got up and walked to the barre. Amanda hugged herself and closed her eyes. She was lying on the flagstones, covered with blood—a man's blood. She looked up and saw herself leaning over the balcony. Then she reached up a hand and realized that it was etched in mist, that she had no substance.

Something was inside her. Those weren't her memories. That was Madame leaning over the balcony—a young Madame, looking vulnerable and frightened. "Get out," Amanda whispered, but the thing's icy fingers gripped her even tighter and she stood up, even though she didn't want to.

xiii

It was in the room. Greta couldn't ignore it any longer. She turned and looked at the dancers, keeping an eye on the mirror. She hadn't seen any more white flashes, no hands appearing mysteriously out of the air. If she stayed here, she *would* see that. It would reveal itself to her and she would look foolish in front of her dancers. She couldn't risk that.

If she left the practice room, it would follow. She adjusted her kerchief, stepped away from the barre and crossed the polished floor into the hallway.

Amanda followed.

Amanda. That little slip of a girl. Greta glanced over her shoulder. The girl's eyes held something strange. Fear? The girl glanced at her and for a moment, Greta thought she was seeing herself. No. She was simply looking at a leggy, dark-haired teenager. All new dancers had that frightened expression, especially around their choreographer.

Greta hurried out into the hall, Amanda forgotten. The living room would be the place to go. No one would be there now. She hurried up the stairs. The bones in her ankles felt brittle, especially the left ankle, where she had had the old injury. She remembered this feeling in the pit of her stomach from those last days with Karl—a feeling of heaviness, oppression, coupled with the knowledge that if something didn't change, she would crack.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sebastian nearly crashed into her as she rounded the top stair. He caught her arms. "Greta, are you okay?"

"Fine," she snapped. She didn't have time for Sebastian and his concerns. She was going to settle this. She could feel the shape at her heels, like a bad dream, hovering, threatening to reveal things that should remain secret. Greta opened the door to the living room.

Timothy sat in the overstuffed chair, staring at the silent phone. He glanced up at her, his eyes sunken and haunted. She couldn't stay here either. Timothy would try to handle it for her, and he couldn't. This was one that she had to handle herself.

Greta pulled open the balcony door, feeling cool air wash over her. Fear rose in her stomach, but she pushed it away. She thought she had ended things here once. She would try again. The ghosts lived on the balcony, not in the mansion. The memories centered around this concrete overhang with its molded iron railing.

She stepped onto the concrete, past the patio furniture, feeling the breeze whip at her kerchief. Behind her, the patio door closed. Amanda stood there, looking young, powerful, and angry.

"Leave me alone," Greta said.

"Like you left me all these years?"

The voice was not Amanda's. It was the voice Greta had heard the night before, in the darkness. A gauzy film completely obscured Amanda. Greta squinted, recognized the shape.

She should have recognized it. She had seen it enough in the mirror years back, dancing across from her, mimicking her moves. The dancer. The prima ballerina. The girl Karl had loved, used, and misused. The one who had approached Karl and hit him with the heels of her hand.

"You killed him," the voice said. "Then you *left* me here with him. And the only way I can get rid of him is to give him *you*."

Amanda seemed diminished. Greta reached for her, and stopped when she felt coldness around the girl's body.

"Who are you?" Greta asked.

"So long that you don't even remember." There was pain in the voice. Amanda came closer.

Greta did not move.

"Let me show you," the voice said. Amanda touched Greta's arm. The chill slipped into her, filling her. Pain flooded in with the chill. Physical pain first, from the years of stretching an underdeveloped body into the dance. Then dreams of being a prima ballerina, adored by the crowd, by people, by those close to her. And then Karl, taking those dreams, shattering them, image by image. *You could be a dancer if you use that body of yours,* he had said at the height of her career. She had the adulation, but she couldn't enjoy it. She was talented, loved, but imperfect. Karl

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kept stretching her and stretching her until she thought that she would break, she *knew* that she would break, and she hit him with both hands and sent him flying—

The balcony door opened with a snap. Greta backed away. She didn't want Timothy and Sebastian to see her like this. Sebastian stopped at the doorway, but Timothy kept coming. Timothy, who had loved the girl, would recognize the girl who had possessed Amanda.

Suddenly the cold left Greta, separated from her, and she felt hands slap against her chest, Amanda's hands, chill hands. Greta's balance shifted, and she knew that she was going to fall. She grabbed for Amanda's wrists, but the cold was too thick. Greta's fingers slid off Amanda's skin. The iron railing dug into Greta's thighs and she fell, spinning, turning. Timothy leaned over the railing and she reached up to him—*Timothy!*—he had always saved her, always, but then there was nothing, nothing but flagstones, sharp, all-encompassing pain (*the last dance move, the final impossible twist*) and Karl's hands on her, lifting her.

Everything will be all right, he said, his voice kind and sad.

She looked up, saw herself—the other part of herself, the part made up of dreams and hopes, the part she used to think was the best part of herself—as mist engulfing Amanda. And as she watched, the mist disappeared.

Karl ran his hand along her hair. *Silver,* he said. *Just like I told you.* He put his arm around her. She looked down and saw her body twisted and bleeding on the flagstones. *You don't need it,* Karl said. *You will dance so much better without it. Come. There is much work for us to do.*

Work. With Karl. *Timothy!* she cried, but he turned away and she knew that he couldn't hear her, that he would never hear her or save her again.

You are mine, Greta, Karl said. He led her back inside, toward the auditorium. As they went though the open door, she thought she heard laughter, female laughter, following them.

xiv

The rusted iron cut into the palm of his hand. Timothy leaned over the railing. Greta lay there in a final, obscene curl, her body at last failing her. He sighed, having seen it before, from the same balcony, knowing that she, too, was dead. Only this time, it didn't come as a shock. Somehow he had always known that Greta would die, perhaps because she had never seemed completely alive—not since Karl's death.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Timothy turned. Sebastian stood against the glass doors, his eyes wide. Amanda clutched the railing, swaying. Her face was white, her features jutting out prominently against hollow cheekbones. He wondered how he'd ever thought that she looked like Greta. Amanda looked like herself.

Timothy closed his eyes, again seeing the young Greta push her older self off the balcony. Amanda was simply a tool, nothing more.

"Did you see it?" Timothy asked. He opened his eyes.

"Amanda pushed her," Sebastian whispered.

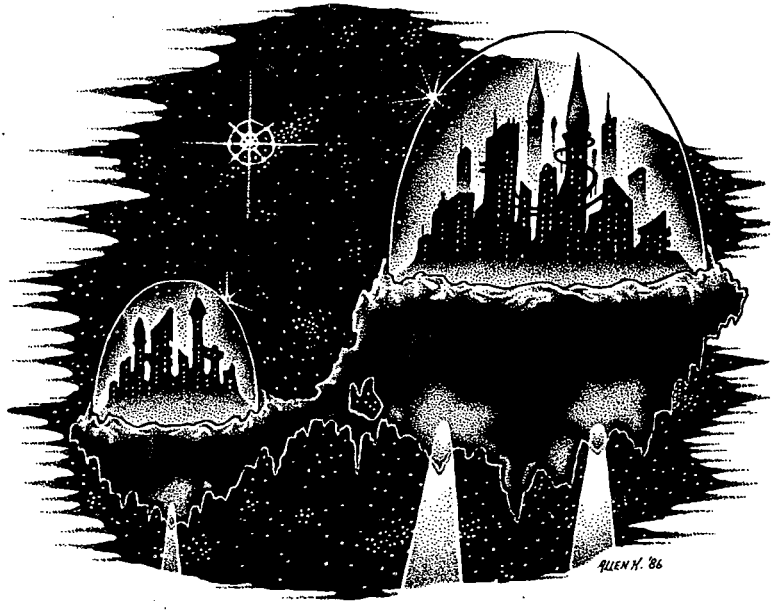
"No!" Amanda cried. Her voice was shaking. Timothy put a hand on hers. Her skin was damp, chill, as if she had been buried in snow.

"Madame fell," Timothy said. The second lie was easier than the first, perhaps because this time, it was not really a lie. "Greta slipped and fell."

Sebastian locked eyes with him for a moment, then looked away in tacit agreement.

Timothy took a deep breath. Time to go to the phone, to tell the police about another body at Graystone. And when that was over, he would have decisions to make, about the company, about the performance (*it wouldn't be an anniversary performance. It would be a memorial*), about the publicity. Funny that he didn't feel tired. Or sad. Or even empty.

He felt free. ●



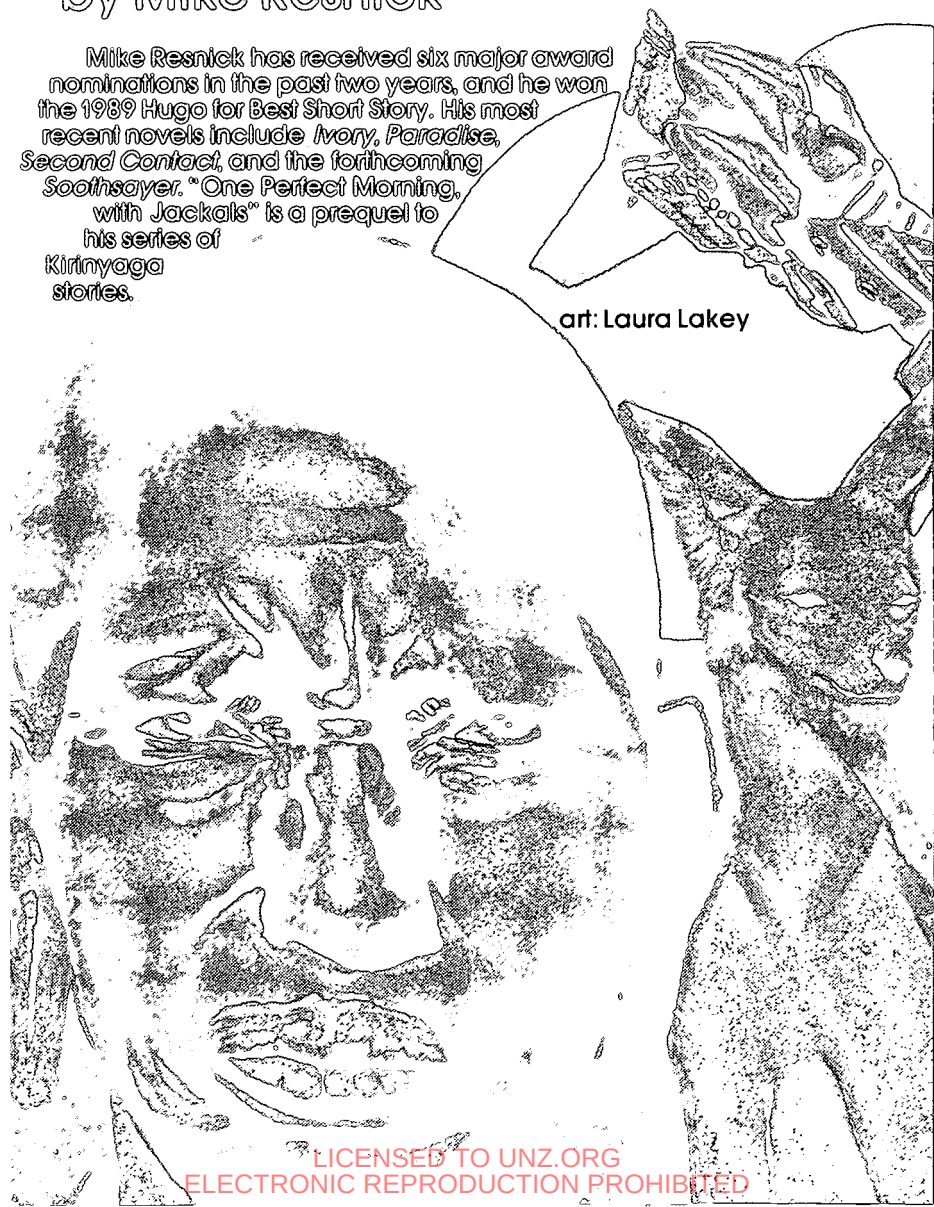
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ONE PERFECT MORNING, WITH JACKALS

by Mike Resnick

Mike Resnick has received six major award nominations in the past two years, and he won the 1989 Hugo for Best Short Story. His most recent novels include *Ivory*, *Paradise*, *Second Contact*, and the forthcoming *Soothsayer*. "One Perfect Morning, with Jackals" is a prequel to his series of Kirinyaga stories.

art: Laura Lakey



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ngai is the creator of all things. He made the lion and the elephant, the vast savannah and the towering mountains, the Kikuyu and the Maasai and the Wakamba.

Thus, it was only reasonable for my father's father and *his* father's father to believe that Ngai was all-powerful. Then the Europeans came, and they killed all the animals, and they covered the savannahs with their factories and the mountains with their cities, and they assimilated the Maasai and the Wakamba, and one day all that was left of what Ngai had created was the Kikuyu.

And it was among the Kikuyu that Ngai waged His final battle against the god of the Europeans.

My former son lowered his head as he stepped into my hut.

"*Jambo,* my father," he said, looking somewhat uncomfortable, as usual, in the close confines of the rounded walls.

"*Jambo,* Edward," I replied.

He stood before me, not quite knowing what to do with his hands. Finally he placed them in the pockets of his elegantly tailored silk suit.

"I have come to drive you to the spaceport," he said at last.

I nodded, and slowly got to my feet. "It is time."

"Where is your luggage?" he asked.

"I am wearing it," I said, indicating my dull red *kikoi.*

"You're not taking anything else?" he said, surprised.

"There is nothing else I care to take," I replied.

He paused and shifted his weight uncomfortably, as he always seemed to do in my presence. "Shall we go outside?" he suggested at last, walking to the door of my hut. "It's very hot in here, and the flies are murderous."

"You must learn to ignore them."

"I do not *have* to ignore them," he replied, almost defensively. "There are no flies where I live."

"I know. They have all been killed."

"You say that as if it were a sin rather than a blessing."

I shrugged and followed him outside, where two of my chickens were pecking diligently at the dry red earth.

"It's a beautiful morning, is it not?" he said. "I was afraid it might be as warm as yesterday."

I looked out across the vast savannah, which had been turned into farmland. Wheat and corn seemed to sparkle in the morning sun.

"A perfect morning," I agreed. Then I turned and saw a splendid vehicle parked about thirty yards away, white and sleek and shining with chrome.

"Is it new?" I asked, indicating the car.

He nodded proudly. "I bought it last week."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"German?"

"British."

"Of course," I said.

The glow of pride vanished, and he shifted his weight again. "Are you ready?"

"I have been ready for a long time," I answered, opening the door and easing myself into the passenger's seat.

"I never saw you do that before," he remarked, entering the car and starting the ignition.

"Do what?"

"Use your safety harness."

"I have never had so many reasons not to die in a car crash," I replied.

He forced a smile to his lips and began again. "I have a surprise for you," he said as the car pulled away and I looked back at my *boma* for the very last time.

"Oh?"

He nodded. "We will see it on the way to the spaceport."

"What is it?" I asked.

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise."

I shrugged and remained silent.

"We'll have to take some of the back roads to reach what I want to show you," he continued. "You'll be able to take a last look at your country along the way."

"This is not my country."

"You're not going to start *that* again, are you?"

"*My* country teems with life," I said adamantly. "*This* country has been smothered by concrete and steel, or covered by row upon row of European crops."

"My father," he said wearily as we sped past a huge wheatfield, "the last elephant and lion were killed before you were born. You have *never* seen Kenya teeming with wildlife."

"Yes I have," I answered him.

"When?"

I pointed to my head. "In here."

"It doesn't make any sense," he said, and I could tell that he was trying to control his temper.

"What doesn't?"

"That you can turn your back on Kenya and go live on some terraformed planetoid, just because you want to wake up to the sight of a handful of animals grazing."

"I did not turn my back on Kenya, Edward," I said patiently. "Kenya turned its back on *us*."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That simply isn't so," he said. "The President and most of his cabinet are Kikuyu. You *know* that."

"They call themselves Kikuyu," I said. "That does not make them Kikuyu."

"They *are* Kikuyu!" he insisted.

"The Kikuyu do not live in cities that were built by Europeans," I replied. "They do not dress as Europeans. They do not worship the Europeans' god. And they do not drive European machines," I added pointedly. "Your vaunted President is still a *kehee*—a boy who has not undergone the circumcision ritual."

"If he is a boy, then he is a fifty-seven-year-old boy."

"His age is unimportant."

"But his accomplishments are. He is responsible for the Turkana Pipeline, which has brought irrigation to the entire Northern Frontier District."

"He is a *kehee* who brings water to the Turkana and the Rendille and the Samburu," I agreed. "What is that to the Kikuyu?"

"Why do you persist in speaking like an ignorant old savage?" he demanded irritably. "You were schooled in Europe and America. You *know* what our President has accomplished."

"I speak the way I speak because I *have* been schooled in Europe and America. I have seen Nairobi grow into a second London, with all of that city's congestion and pollution, and Mombasa into another Miami, with all of that city's attendant dangers and diseases. I have seen our people forget what it means to be a Kikuyu, and speak proudly about being Kenyans, as if Kenya was anything more than an arbitrary set of lines drawn on a European map."

"Those lines have been there for almost three centuries," he pointed out.

I sighed. "As long as you have known me, you have never understood me, Edward."

"Understanding is a two-way street," he said with sudden bitterness. "When did you ever make an effort to understand *me*?"

"I raised you."

"But to this day you don't *know* me," he said, driving dangerously fast on the bumpy road. "Did we ever speak as father and son? Did you ever discuss anything but the Kikuyu with me?" He paused. "I was the only Kikuyu to play on the national basketball team, and yet you never once came to watch me."

"It is a European game."

"In point of fact, it is an *American* game."

I shrugged. "They are the same."

"And now it is an African game as well. I played on the only Kenyan

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

team ever to defeat the Americans. I had hoped that would make you proud of me, but you never even mentioned it."

"I heard many stories of an Edward Kimante who played basketball against the Europeans and the Americans," I said. "But I knew that this could not be my son, for I gave my son the name Koriba."

"And my mother gave me the middle name of Edward," he said. "And since she spoke to me and shared my burdens, and you did not, I took the name she gave me."

"That is your right."

"I don't give a damn about my rights!" He paused. "It didn't have to be this way."

"I remained true to my convictions," I said. "It is you who tried to become a Kenyan rather than a Kikuyu."

"I *am* a Kenyan," he said. "I live here, I work here, I love my country. *All* of it, not just one tiny segment."

I sighed deeply. "You are truly your mother's son."

"You have not asked about her," he noted.

"If she were not well, you would have told me."

"And that's all you have to say about the woman you lived with for seventeen years?" he demanded.

"It was she who left to live in the city of the Europeans, not I," I replied.

He laughed humorlessly. "Nakuru is *not* a European city. It has two million Kenyans and less than twenty thousand whites."

"Any city is, by definition, European. The Kikuyu do not live in cities."

"Look around you," he said in exasperation. "More than 95 percent of them *do* live in cities."

"Then they are no longer Kikuyu," I said placidly.

He squeezed the steering wheel until his knuckles turned ash-gray.

"I do not wish to argue with you," he said, struggling to control his emotions. "It seems that is all we ever do any more. You are my father, and despite all that has come between us, I love you—and I had hoped to make my peace with you today, since we shall never see each other again."

"I have no objection to that," I said. "I do not enjoy arguing."

"For a man who doesn't enjoy it, you managed to argue for twelve long years to get the government to sponsor this new world of yours."

"I did not enjoy the arguments, only the results," I replied.

"Have they decided what to name it yet?"

"Kirinyaga."

"Kirinyaga?" he repeated, surprised.

I nodded. "Does not Ngai sit upon His golden throne atop Kirinyaga?"

"Nothing sits atop Mount Kenya except a city."

"You see?" I said with a smile. "Even the name of the holy mountain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

has been corrupted by Europeans. It is time that we give Ngai a new Kirinyaga from which to rule the universe."

"Perhaps it *is* fitting, at that," he said. "There has been precious little room for Ngai in today's Kenya."

Suddenly he began slowing down, and a moment later we turned off the road and across a recently harvested field, driving very carefully so as not to damage his new car.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I told you: I have a surprise for you."

"What kind of surprise can there be in the middle of an empty field?" I asked.

"You will see."

He came to a stop about twenty yards from a clump of thorn bushes, and turned off the ignition.

"Look carefully," he whispered.

I stared at the bushes for a moment without seeing anything. Then there was a brief movement, and suddenly the whole picture came into view, and I could see two jackals standing behind the foliage, staring timidly at us.

"There have been no animals here in more than two decades," I whispered.

"They seem to have wandered in after the last rains," he replied softly. "I suppose they must be living off the rodents and birds."

"How did you find them?"

"*I* didn't," he answered. "A friend of mine in the Game Department told me they were here." He paused. "They'll be captured and relocated to a game park sometime next week, before they can do any lasting damage."

They seemed totally misplaced, hunting in tracks made by huge threshing and harvesting machines, searching for the safety of a savannah that had not existed for more than a century, hiding from cars rather than other predators. I felt a certain kinship to them.

We watched them in total silence for perhaps five minutes. Then Edward checked his timepiece and decided that we had to continue to the spaceport.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asked as we drove back onto the road.

"Very much," I said.

"I had hoped you would."

"They are being moved to a game park, you said?"

He nodded his head. "A few hundred miles to the north, I believe."

"The jackal walked this land long before the farmers arrived," I noted.

"But they are an anachronism," he replied. "They don't belong here any more."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I nodded my head. "It is fitting."

"That the jackals go to a game park?" he asked.

"That the Kikuyu, who were here before the Kenyans, leave for a new world," I answered. "For we, too, are an anachronism that no longer belongs here."

He increased his speed, and soon we had passed through the farming area and entered the outskirts of Nairobi.

"What will you do on Kirinyaga?" he asked, breaking a long silence.

"We shall live as the Kikuyu were meant to live."

"I mean you, personally."

I smiled, anticipating his reaction. "I am to be the *mundumugu*."

"The witch doctor?" he repeated incredulously.

"That is correct."

"I can't believe it!" he continued. "You are an educated man. How can you sit cross-legged in the dirt and roll bones and read omens?"

"The *mundumugu* is also a teacher, and the custodian of the tribal customs," I said. "It is an honorable profession."

He shook his head in disbelief. "So I am to explain to people that my father has become a witch doctor."

"You need fear no embarrassment," I said. "You need only tell them that Kirinyaga's *mundumugu* is named Koriba."

"That is *my* name!"

"A new world requires a new name," I said. "You cast it aside to take a European name. Now I will take it back and put it to good use."

"You're serious about this, aren't you?" he said as we pulled into the spaceport.

"From this day forward, my name is Koriba."

The car came to a stop.

"I hope you will bring more honor to it than I did, my father," he said as a final gesture of conciliation.

"You have brought honor to the name you chose," I said. "That is quite enough for one lifetime."

"Do you really mean that?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Then why have you never said so before now?"

"Haven't I?" I asked, surprised.

We got out of the car and he accompanied me to the departure area. Finally he came to a stop.

"This is as far as I am permitted to go."

"I thank you for the ride," I said.

He nodded.

"And for the jackals," I added. "It was truly a perfect morning."

"I will miss you, my father," he said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I know."

He seemed to be waiting for me to say something, but I could think of nothing further to say.

For a moment I thought he was going to place his arms around me and hug me, but instead he reached out, shook my hand, muttered another farewell, and turned on his heel and left.

I thought he would go directly to his car, but when I looked through a porthole of the ship that would take us to Kirinyaga, I saw him standing at a huge, plate-glass window, waving his hand, while his other hand held a handkerchief.

That was the last sight I saw before the ship took off. But the image I held in my mind was of the two jackals, watching alien sights in a land that had itself become foreign to them. I hoped that they would adjust to their new life in the game park that had been artificially created for them.

Something told me that I soon would know. ●

Customer Service or Subscriber Assistance
Please direct all changes of address
and subscription questions to:
Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine
P.O. Box 7058
Red Oak, IA 51591

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

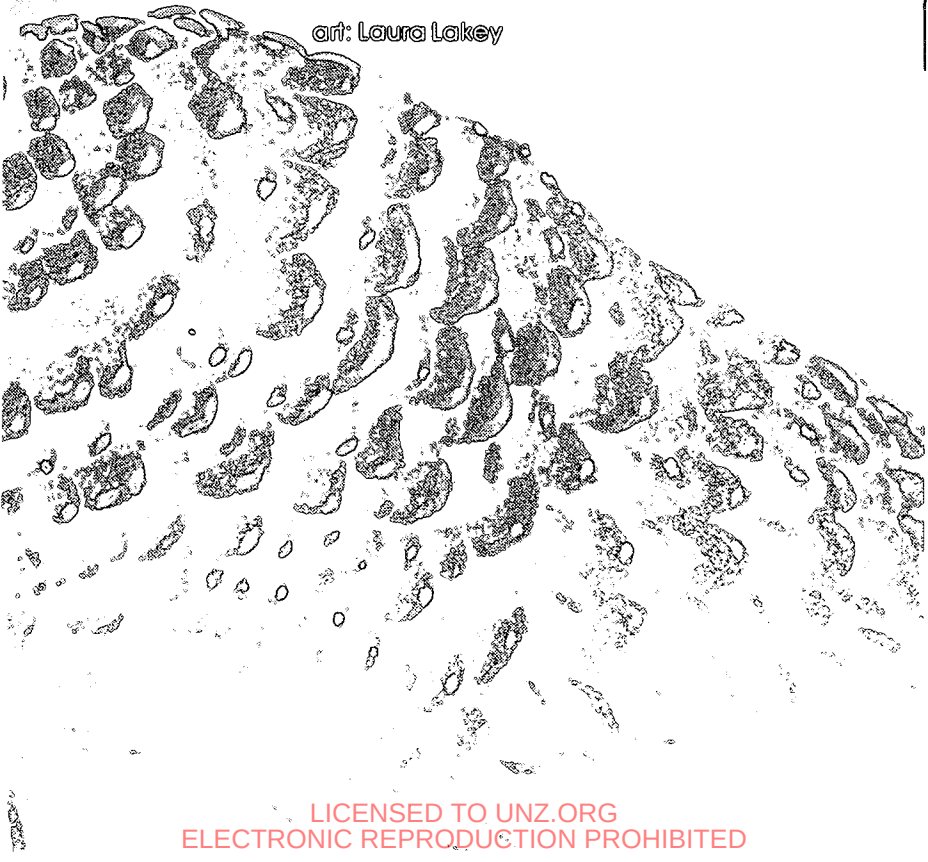
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RAISING CANE

by Janet Kagan

Janet Kagan is the author of *Uhura's Song* (Simon & Schuster)—one of the most popular *Star Trek* novels ever published. We are glad that she continues to write stories set in her *own* highly popular series about the planet Mirabile and its enchanting inhabitants.

art: Laura Lakey



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

So far, it looked like spring as usual. The Cornish hens were hatching everything from chickadees to lizards—with the occasional frog on the side. Two of the ewes at LastEdges had given birth to angora goats. (Susan had taken the lambing off my hands this year. Gave her an excuse to see Janzen. I hadn't warned her lambing would leave her too exhausted to do more than wave to him in passing, on the way to the next birthing—she'd get me for that when she got back, no doubt.)

Three new stands of forsythia had flowered tulip-red. Likewise, an entire field of dandelions had gone red on us, which meant we had to check every one to see what it had in store for us when it seeded.

If they hadn't been so eye-catching, I doubt a single plant would have lasted out the first flowering.

Red is for redundancy. When the folks back on Earth sent us (I use the "us" loosely; I'm third-generation Mirabilan myself) off to Mirabile, they thought they'd make our life more secure the more redundant they made our equipment and everything else they sent along. The everything else included the plants and animals. Plant a dandelion in the right EC (EC for "environmental conditions") and you get dandelions most succeeding generations. Plant one in the wrong EC and the next generation flowers red to let you know it's about to seed something no *Earthly* dandelion would dream of seeding—a cabbage butterfly egg, maybe. Lots of extra room in a dandelion helix for whatever the expedition's geneticists thought we might need.

Damnify know why they didn't tell us how to stop the process. Would have made *my* life simpler.

As it is, the only thing I can count on to stay the same from one generation to the next is the native Mirabilan wildlife—and the human beings (genetically speaking, that is).

So it didn't surprise me much when Lalique Cowboy Imbamba called. Lalique's in charge of that Guernsey herd we've been trying to stabilize for the last thirty years or so. Once we get a decent-sized breeding pool built up, we can parcel them out around the colony for milk and cheese production, not to mention the occasional chop. We want to parcel out cows that pretty consistently produce calves, though, rather than goats or musk oxen or, worst case, Dragon's Teeth.

The look on Lalique's face said Dragon's Teeth. Well, at least it'd be a change from grubbing in the dandelion genes. I'd gotten to the point where I was doing gene-reads in my sleep—and they were all dandelion.

"Give me the worst," I said. "I could use the change."

"Uh, Annie? It's complicated. Let me tell you the calving results first, okay?"

Okay by me. I told the lab computer to save the rest of the dandelion gene-reads for later and nodded to Lalique's image. Then I hauled up a chair and settled in to listen.

"We've had thirty-four live births so far. Only three stillbirths. Of the three stillbirths, two were genuine calves, the third was a Dragon's Tooth."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Not a viable Dragon's Tooth, then," I said. "What's the tally on the live births?"

"Calves—every last one of them. Except—"

Here it comes, I thought. Tell you the truth, I was looking forward to it.

"Except two of them were so underdeveloped that we're bottle-feeding them. When I did the gene-read on them, it turned out they were some kind of cow *other* than Guernsey. Both mothers birthed them prematurely, even though they were the same size as the rest of the calves."

Could have been worse. I had her shoot me copies of the gene-reads for the new batch of calves so far. Printed 'em up hardcopy for the luxury of it. (Paper—now *that's* one we owe to the thoughtfulness of whoever back on Earth included kudzu genes in the honeysuckle.) At first glance, there was nothing on paper worth the frown she'd been frowning.

When I looked back at Lalique's image to see if the frown was still that bad it went from bad to worse.

Her finger all but jabbed out of the screen, pointing somewhere behind me, and she shouted, "Annie, look out!"

I dodged and turned at the same time. Neither action saved me from a blast of foul breath in the face and a "GRONK!" in both ears that nearly deafened me.

"Gronk to you, too," I said, when I'd gotten my breath back. It was only Mabob.

Mabob was so pleased I'd talked its language that it rattled its scales all over and let out a second airhorn *gronk!*

A faint "Annie?" from the screen reminded me that Lalique didn't know it was "only" Mabob. I turned back. "Nothing to worry about, Lalique," I said, then I bellowed for Leo.

"What the hell is it?" Lalique wanted to know.

I took a look at "it" from her point of view. It was over three feet tall and had a beak that could probably take your hand off at a snap. If you've seen parrots in ships' records, think of it as an oversized parrot without the wings. Or better still, a dodo—same outsized head on a stubby body. And then forget all about birds, because it isn't.

Its scales (which are actually fur fused hard as chiton, like a pangolin's) were striped—that they were all shades of green didn't mean they didn't clash with each other. On the top of its head the fur was unfused and actually fur-like to the touch, but it stood out in spikes, as if the thing had just stuck one of its talons into the electric wiring. The eyes (and I mean the whole eye, not just the pupil) were pumpkin orange, which didn't help its looks any.

Come to think of it, nothing would help its looks any—probably Lalique was seeing the Giant Killer Bird, straight out of her grandaddy's scariest tale.

At the moment, it was peering around my shoulder, both orange eyeballs popped and fixed on Lalique's image in utter fascination.

"It's not a bird," I said. "Lalique, meet Mabob. That's short for Thin-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gamabob. You remember Leo hired on with us to study the Mirabilan wildlife? Well, he brought this one home as an egg. Mabob, this is Lalique."

"Uh," said Lalique. "Hi, Mabob."

"GRONK!" said Mabob, rattling his scales happily. The image may not have smelled human but being talked to was good enough for Mabob.

"Leo!" I bellowed again, with Mabob taking up the call for Leo enthusiastically. "Come collect this damn thing! You promised me you'd keep it out of the lab," I finished, as Leo opened the door.

"I didn't let him in," Leo said. "Somebody must have left the door unlatched. Sorry. I'll get him out of your hair." Leo let out a *gronk* that pretty much lived up to Mabob's decibel level—and Mabob charged out to greet him at the same level.

"Annie," said Lalique, "That's *weird!*"

I couldn't help but grin at her. "Any weirder than a cow?"

She grinned back. "Not when you stop to think about it, no."

I nodded at her. "Now, tell me what the problem is. I don't see anything unusual in this," I said, flapping the hardcopy at her.

"Is it possible for cows to, uh, give birth to seeds that grow plants?"

"Technically, yes." I looked at the hardcopy again—she'd only given me the gene-reads on the calves, not the cows that had birthed them. "I'd need the gene-reads on the cows in question to say for sure."

Before she could volunteer to get the cell samples and analyze them herself, I added, "Tell you what—I'll come up for a looksee."

"Sure, Annie. You'll want to see the plants anyhow. Maybe you can give us some suggestions about how to get rid of the damn things."

"Or about how to get along with them."

"You haven't seen them yet. They can't be Mirabilan and if you don't need them for anything, *I* need them gone."

Personally, I didn't care if the damn things had fangs eight feet long—all I needed was a change from dandelions.

I palmed the next hundred dandelion gene-reads off on Mike and went outside to hunt up Leo.

Found him watching Mabob stalk a whompem. I kept my mouth shut and watched as well, a little surprised that Leo didn't intervene — whompems run about a foot long, with a full set of predator's teeth and claws. This one was no exception.

The other thing that surprised me was that Mabob was actually keeping its mouth shut, something I didn't think it was capable of doing for more than three seconds at a time. Despite its size, that green-stripe camouflage really worked—when Mabob froze, it vanished into the background as if it had never been there.

It had worked its way between the whompem and the edge of the forest. Took me some hard looking to spot it. Then it started to inch toward the whompem. Those huge clawed feet were absolutely silent.

Maybe *I* thought it was absolutely silent but *something* tipped off the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whompem and it ran like hell. Like hell wasn't nearly good enough. Mabob had long legs and a flat-out gallop I wouldn't have believed unless I'd seen it.

Mabob chased the whompem the length of the street and overtook it in front of Mike and Selima's house—where it rolled its talons into a club and swung at the whompem's head. Even at that distance, I could hear bone crack. The whompem went flying. Mabob dashed after it and, before the whompem hit the ground, Mabob had sunk a footful of talons into its spine.

Mabob let go with a triumphant *gronk!* (Been nighttime, it would've waked the entire town.) Then it picked up the whompem in its beak and trotted back to us. It laid the dead whompem at Leo's feet and gronked again.

"For me?" said Leo.

Mabob nudged the carcass closer to Leo with its foot. Leo stooped and—after checking to make sure it really was dead—picked the carcass up. Mabob rattled its scales in pleasure.

"What do I do now?" Leo asked me, out of the side of his mouth.

"Same as with a cat, I guess. Tell it it's a mighty hunter. Thank it. Then say you're not hungry right now and give it back."

So that's what he did. Mabob took it in good spirit, rattling like a dozen maracas all through the compliments Leo paid it and rattling even harder when Leo rubbed it affectionately where the spiky fur was soft, making it still spikier.

Mabob didn't seem put out when Leo returned the gift, which was just as well. It clamped a foot on the carcass and began to rip chunks off with its beak and swallow them, bones and all.

"Good thing it thinks you're its mother," I said to Leo.

"That's the first time he's ever done that," said Leo, putting just enough emphasis on the "he" to catch my attention.

"I'll call it a he if it makes you happy, Leo. But I don't know it's a he and neither do you. And I can't tell from the gene-read unless you bring me enough other samples that they include one of the opposite sex. If, that is, this is one of Mirabile's two-sexed types and not something else altogether."

"It'd simplify your syntax."

" 'He' it is, then. At least until we find out different. And you'd better get *him* out of Selima's snap peas unless you want Selima to remove *his* head."

Mabob isn't too particular about what he eats. He'll try just about anything, animal or vegetable, and he thinks most of it is perfectly good. The one time he'd refused to try something Leo offered him from the table, I got curious enough to do a little testing. Turned out that particular Earth import *would* have made him sick—that's pretty efficient hardwiring.

Leo had managed to hustle him out of Mike and Selima's garden. No real problem. I'd already learned that Mabob would do just about any-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing Leo asked him to. Meanwhile, I got around to remembering what I'd wanted to talk to Leo about in the first place.

"I'm headed up to Lalique's," I said. "She's got a problem plant—she says it's my bailiwick but it could be yours. Want to come along?"

"That's Haffenhaff Island, right? I was just about to head up there myself—"

"Perfect."

"—I was planning to take Mabob along."

"So you get me instead."

He smiled and spread his arms. Anything for an excuse to neck, I always say. (And we always do.) Mabob thought we were fascinating and rattled his scales furiously while he stretched his neck to try to peer between us. To my relief, he didn't gronk once.

When we broke the clinch, Leo said, "How about both?"

"Hunh?"

"I want you to meet Nikolai and I want Nikolai to meet you *and* Mabob."

Nikolai's the third of Leo's kids—and the only one I hadn't met yet. Takes after Leo, who was an opener in his younger days. Which is why he hadn't even made it to our wedding—he'd been off opening new territory at the time (and for nearly a year after). If Leo wanted him to meet Mabob, too, who was I to argue?

"The things I do for love," I said. "What are the chances you can keep Mabob from gronking the entire trip? I hear one of those trumpet-blasts in a closed hover and I'm likely to lose what hearing I have left."

"We'll open the windows. If we're lucky, he'll gronk at the scenery." He turned to Mabob. "Want to go for a ride, Mabob?"

The answer was obviously "yes"—and there went the rest of my hearing. Mabob beat us to the hover by fifteen minutes. Which gave us ten minutes to ourselves without an audience—and we made damn good use of 'em.

Damn Thingamabob *didn't* gronk at the scenery—he gronked at Leo and the entire hover rang with the sound. On the second gronk, I grounded the hover in the nearest clearing. "Hush!" I said to Mabob. "That's enough! Out!"

Mabob rattled his scales engagingly but I wasn't having any. No point doing this if it wasn't a break from the damn dandelions. "Leo, open the door and shove him out."

"We can't just leave him here, Annie!" He sounded a lot like a kid defending a pet, which I suppose he was.

"I'm not. I'm just putting him out for gronking in a closed space. Do it."

He did it grudgingly but he did it. I twiddled my thumbs and waited until Mabob shut up and started to peer wistfully through the window. Then I had Leo let him back in—anxious but subdued.

It was some twenty minutes before he relaxed enough to give us an-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

other airhorn squawk—at which point I grounded the hover on the spot and threw him out all over again. This time he shut up a lot faster.

By the third time, he shut up the minute he was out of the hover. Leo raised an eyebrow at me.

"I'm taking a leaf from Elly's book," I said. As her name says, Elly Raiser Roget raises kids—and she's one of the best. I'd once seen her use a similar ploy for misbehavior. If anybody would know how to handle the situation, it'd be Elly. "He's quiet. Let him back in."

After that, the rest of the ride was quiet, if you don't count the maracas as noise. Compared to the gronks, I didn't. Five minutes later we came to the Omigolly, turned the hover downriver and there was Haffenhaff.

Haffenhaff's a good-sized island smack-dab in the middle of the Omigolly River. Grandaddy Jason picked it as the right place to start raising a herd of Guernseys because, he figured, it was big enough to support the size herd he had planned but small enough we could police the EC pretty well. Had the added virtue there wasn't much place for the herd to wander off to. Sooner or later, they'd hit the Omigolly and that'd stop 'em wandering further. He was right: in all my years, I'd never seen the Omigolly low enough to walk across.

From the upstream end, the island looked barren. Scarcely enough vegetation to make an environmental run-up seem worth the trouble—mostly shale and prickles. The prickles were interesting though, being an epiphyte with the damndest set of equipment for clinging to bare rock you ever saw.

The downstream end was already lush and green, with a spring overlay of reds and yellows. Grandaddy Jason told me once that *his* mother had been tickled to death that first spring to find that, "just like Earth, Mirabile thought of flowers, too!"

A lot of the firstfolk seemed to have felt the same relief. Damnify I know why—they couldn't have had much experience with flowers after so many generations ship-board.

As far as I was concerned, I could have done without—at least without the dandelions. But it was hardly fair to hold the dandelions against Mirabilan evolution. Couldn't even hold them against Gaian evolution. I could—and did—hold them against a bunch of long-dead genetic engineers.

Leo'd been giving the island the same once-over I had. "Now I see why it got dubbed 'half and half,' " he said, grinning at me. Then he pointed. "That's where we're going, Mabob."

Catching Leo's excitement, Mabob rattled his scales. He looked like he was working up to another gronk.

"Don't you dare, Mabob," I said. "Hush!"

He didn't gronk. I was impressed. Telling him three times seemed to have been enough.

"How about that," Leo said. "It worked."

"He's brighter than he looks. Question is, will he remember when the time comes to head home?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We'll see," said Leo, scratching Mabob around the eyes.

Would be interesting to know. That Mabob took no for an answer made him a lot brighter than I'd originally thought—especially that he took the "no" from me rather than from Leo, who'd raised him from an egg. He surely didn't think of me as his raiser—he'd only known me for a few weeks, since Leo'd brought him home half-grown—but maybe he'd lumped me in with official adult, worth learning survival techniques from.

I grounded the hover next to the main house, looked first, then stepped onto the ground. "Watch out for cow pies," I said to Leo. "Lalique doesn't usually let the Guernseys into this area but that doesn't mean they haven't been here."

Cow pies—the bane of my life for five years. Nothing native to Mirabile would touch the things, so they'd just piled up—and up and up. For a while it'd looked as if we wouldn't be able to keep the cows. I got stubborn and dug through ships' files until I found a truly obscure reference. Turned out they'd had the same trouble with cows on some island on Earth, until they'd imported a particular kind of dung beetle. Three months later, I'd matched the reference to the right beetle in the ships' cell stores. Three months after that, a lot of beetles were eating themselves into oblivion and I got treated to my first slice of rare roast beef. Now *that* was an experience I'd like to repeat sometime!

I was about to try to describe the indescribable to Leo when Lalique came waving and hollering up. Mabob went running to greet her. Leo took off after Mabob, bellowing as he ran, "Don't shoot, Lalique! He's friendly!"

Mabob stopped, honked happily at Leo, waited for him to catch up—then the two of them went to meet her together. By the time I ambled along, Mabob had already won Lalique's laughing approval. She greeted me with, "You're right, Annie. He's not that much funnier than a cow. And he's a damn sight more responsive. Cows don't pay you much attention."

I grinned at Leo. "His raiser taught him some social graces. Not many, but more than the average Guernsey."

Usually I get met by half a dozen kids, plus the rest of the cowboys. Today there was no sign of Lalique's brood. I looked around, wondering at the silence. "Where is everybody?"

"Keeping an eye on the last few births. I got 'time off' because I was up all last night. I got a few hours sleep waiting for you."

I snorted. "Your 'time off' sounds a lot like mine. Let's get to work then."

"Do you want to see the gene-reads first or the Dragon's Tooth?"

Dragon's Tooth is current slang for what's technically a chimera. What those fool geneticists back on Earth forgot when they were building in their redundancies is that genes mix. Take a cow with a buried gene for rabbit and a cow with a buried gene for deer and the next generation is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

just as likely to be a mythical jackalope as it is to be rabbit or deer. The combinations get downright unbelievable.

Lucky for us most of them aren't viable. It's the ones that survive that give us the headaches. *Two* cows with encrypted plant genes didn't sound likely to me but I wasn't about to bet on it after some of the Dragon's Teeth I've been chewed on by.

I'd have opted for the gene-reads first, if only because Lalique could get a bit more sleep while I worked on them, but I didn't get that choice. The walkie-talkie at Lalique's hip squawked and she answered it. All I could make out was that they had "another one stuck" and "Bring your machete."

Lalique said, "You get to see the Dragon's Teeth first—and you get to see them in action."

We followed her to the house and armed ourselves with machetes. Didn't even occur to me to get my shotgun out of the hover—if Lalique said best dealt with by machete, I believed her. Dragon's Tooth or not, *she'd* had experience with it and I hadn't.

If it was a Dragon's Tooth, it belonged in the slower-than-molasses family. We took a long leisurely hike across the pasture. (Mabob got a chance to stretch his legs. Leo got a chance to find out what a cow pie was.) Once we got close enough to hear the calf squealing, I'd have stepped a little more lively, but Lalique just plodded along as before.

Leo glanced at me, frowning at the sound. I shrugged. We stuck with Lalique. Mabob gronked and made a short gallop ahead but the minute he saw Leo wasn't following he did a hasty about-face and galloped back.

The squeals had attracted the attention of a good-sized part of the herd. They were all standing about, watching anxiously, doing nothing—pretty standard cow behavior. From the far side of the herd, a skinny kid in a splashy red shirt waved and shouted. "Over here, Lalique!"

Had to be Jibril, Lalique's third. He'd gotten two feet taller since the last time I'd seen him but he was still as skinny as ever. Skinnier, if that was possible. But it was beginning to look good on him. If Mirabile didn't already have a Masai Guild, he'd have been the kid to start one up.

Behind him, the stand of canes that edged the pasture looked like somebody'd planted them just to make Jibril look good. They were as straight and slender as he was but a good deal taller—framing him. The stand was maybe a hundred feet long and I couldn't see how deep it went. The canes themselves were a rich dark green with splashes of red and orange flowers throughout. The red ones matched Jibril's shirt precisely.

"That's our Dragon's Tooth," said Lalique, pointing in Jibril's direction.

"Real pretty ornamental," I said, not meaning Jibril any more than she had. If the canes were the problem, I hadn't seen enough to worry me yet. Lalique grunted a reply and pushed forward.

Getting through the herd was a lot like slogging through hip-high water—except that the water complains at you for shoving and, once in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a while, especially if the herd's antsy, like this one was, tries to shove back.

Mabob had been sticking behind Leo—cows were new to him and he wasn't taking any chances—but one of the bulls took serious offense at the color of his beak and made snorting noises.

Mabob got defensive and glared at it. Mabob being a half foot taller (if only because of the spiked hair) had the psychological advantage, I think, but the only thing dumber than a cow is a bull.

It snorted again and pawed the ground threateningly. I was about to go over and clout it, the way I'd seen Lalique do often enough, but Mabob knew a threat when he saw one. He answered in kind. He drew himself up to full height—standing on his toes to do it—and bristled his scales. They made a rasping sound and Mabob suddenly looked twice as big as he had before. At the same time, he bugged out his bright orange eyes—"eye-blazing," they call it, when a parrot does it, and they blazed all right.

Stupid bull didn't give an inch. So Mabob escalated—he arched his head over the Guernsey and said, at the top of his lungs, "GRONK!"

All around us, the cattle started. The calf in distress even stopped its squalling. "Annie," said Lalique, with a note of warning in her voice.

"I know." If Mabob rattled them too much, they'd stampede, and I didn't want to be in the middle of it if they did. Grant you, it's not the kind of stampede you see in ships' records, but I, for one, prefer my hips unbruised and my toes untrampled.

"Mabob, *hush!*" I said. Leo was already pushing back toward him.

But the single gronk seemed to have done the job. The bull was backing away. Mabob, delighted by his new-found power, followed . . . until even I could see that he was deliberately stalking the bull. Step by step, and for the pure pleasure of it—because each time he forced the bull back another step, he paused to rattle his scales before he stepped forward again.

About the third step, Leo caught up to them both. "That's enough, Mabob. Don't bully the damn thing." Mabob rattled feathers at Leo and invited him to play with the bull, too. I swear I could actually see the offer made—sort of, "Here, I'll chase him toward you, then you can chase him back."

"Thanks, but no," said Leo. "Come away." It took a bit of coaxing but he managed to lead Mabob away. The bull vanished into the herd, probably to find somebody lower in the pecking order to take it out on.

The calf took up squealing just about where it had left off, so we pushed on. Finally we'd all slogged through to Jibril.

"Hey, Annie!" he said, "Come to slay our Dragon's Teeth?"

"Depends," I said. "Do they need slaying?"

"Well," he said, "I dunno. We've got to cut enough of them down to get the calf out, at least." He pointed into the canebrake.

All I had to do, really, was look where the calf's squeals were coming from . . . the poor thing was thrashing about wildly—and the canes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thrashed with it. Looked for all the world like a sheep caught in brambles, just tangling itself deeper the more it struggled. Only the canes didn't have any thorns that I could see.

"You must be Leo Opener Denness," Jibril was saying. "Boy! Do you ever look like Nikolai!"

My ear appreciated Leo's chuckle at that. ("Wrong way around," Leo said. "Nikolai looks like me.") But mostly I was giving a close look at the canes nearest me.

Close up they looked messy as all hell. The stalks were covered, top to bottom, with something clear and gelatinous—it reminded me a lot of the waterproofing on the stems of a waterlily—but embedded in it was the damndest collection of insects I'd ever seen.

Not just insects, either. Bits of fur and scale were stuck to it as well, along with here and there a small animal.

Dragon's Tooth or not, the plants were unquestionably carnivorous. And they didn't seem any pickier than Mabob about what they ate—a number of the insects looked Earth authentic to me.

I had just about stuck out my finger to poke one into position for a better look—at least enough to confirm my suspicions—when Lalique grabbed my wrist.

"Don't touch it, Annie, or you'll lose skin."

"Wasn't going to touch it. Just the bug." I pointed with my chin at the calf. "If it'll tangle something that size, I know enough not to touch it."

"Okay," Lalique said. To Leo, she added, "Getting loose is a lot like having surgical tape ripped off your body."

"Gotcha," said Leo. "Let's get that calf out before it tangles itself worse."

Lalique shook her head. "You watch while Jibril and I do it. This takes technique and practice. *Next* time you can help, I promise you."

The technique was tricky at that: without grabbing the cane to steady the cut, cut *away* from you—then lever the cut cane against the ground to snap it off the blade of your machete. And hope you don't get hit by any flying bits. If anybody on Mirabile needed a good source of high-quality glue, Lalique had found it.

Things got even trickier when they made it to the calf—they literally had to shave the canes from its body before they had clear enough room to cut them down. The calf, of course, did nothing to help, just kept squalling and struggling.

Mabob got nosy and went in for a closer look before Leo or I could stop him. Leo made to call him back but it was already too late. Mabob had brushed against one of the canes. "Okay, Mabob," Leo said, "Hold still and—"

Mabob glared over his shoulder—not at Leo but at the cane holding him captive—and made a quick swipe with his beak. The cane sprang free, taking a single scale with it.

From then on, he picked his way through the canebrake as gingerly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as a waterwalker—and not once did he brush against another stalk. Nor did he step on any of those Lalique and Jibril had cut down.

"Wonder why it took him *three* times to learn not to gronk in the hover," I said to Leo.

"The connection wasn't as obvious."

"Okay," I said. "I'll buy that."

Lalique glared at Mabob but he didn't notice, being too busy checking out the calf. The calf took one look at Mabob and froze.

That made the job easier—still and all, it took 'em close to twenty minutes to free it up.

Finally, Jibril emerged from the canebrake carrying the calf, followed by Mabob, who looked so smug you'd have thought he had performed the rescue work. Lalique followed with the machetes. Jibril let momma cow check her baby over, then Lalique picked it up again, said, "Come on back to the barn. I've got to put some salve on the little idiot. See you later, Jibril."

"Hang on a minute," I said. "I need a sample, Lalique. Any suggestions?"

"Take your sample with something you won't mind having the sample permanently stuck to," said Lalique.

Jibril laughed. "It's not that bad, Annie. Take one of the leaves. The cows eat them all the time and it doesn't seem to gum up their mouths *or* their guts."

So the cows *had* learned something about the canes. That was worth knowing. They're not utterly stupid, just mostly. Momma cow followed us all the way to the barn, lowing at baby who bleated back. Eager to get into the conversation, Mabob gronked at momma cow, who promptly shut up for the rest of the trek.

Leo and I got the door to let Lalique through. I stopped Mabob before he trotted after Leo. "Listen, you," I said. "One gronk out of you and you get yourself chucked out on your—" I was going to say "ear" but it's not as if he has external ears "—ass."

Mabob paid me careful attention—at least, it looked that way, as he kept his eyes on me the entire time I was laying it on the line to him.

"So, *hush!*" I finished. "Got that?" Mabob rattled at me, for all the world as if he'd understood every word. I'd have settled for his understanding the "hush." It was worth a try though, so I let him in and closed the door behind us.

Inside, about a dozen people were flopped on bales of snapgrass. (Lalique's family—if some of them aren't blood, they're family still. Lalique's that sort of person.) Most of them looked about as dried out as the snapgrass did—from little round Brehani to long tall Gunnar, they had pouchy bags under their heavy-lidded eyes.

One of them—Villamil was his name if memory served, though he too had grown a lot in the last two years—found the strength to raise his head and say, "Last one done, Lalique. That's it for this year."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Orlando—Lalique's husband—his face darker than ever in the shadow of the arm thrown over it, just snored.

Having helped with the calving any number of years (come to think of it, this was only the second year I hadn't), I could remember how it felt. Give 'em each twenty-four hours of straight sleep and they'd be ready to celebrate. Until then they weren't up to feeling anything more than relief.

I went to the cupboard they kept the vet supplies in. Only one of the salves didn't look familiar—I held up the pot.

"That's it," said Lalique.

So while Leo kept Mabob from scaring the daylights out of Lalique's family, the two of us doctored the calf. The surgical tape analogy didn't quite make it, I saw from the damage—the calf had actually ripped at least one strip of skin off its hide in its struggles. "Is that common?" I said, pointing to the wound.

Lalique shook her head. "Mostly it's just a bit of hair here and there that they lose. The older ones anyhow. It's the calves that get the most damage."

She salved up the ripped patch. "At first, we thought they'd been burning themselves somehow—see here." She pointed out a long stripe on the calf's flank; no skin missing, just the hair. I might have guessed a healing burn too, if I'd seen only that one.

"But when we started seeing the flayed bits, we were sure we had a new predator. Or an old predator that had recently acquired a taste for the Earth authentic." Lalique finished the last of the wounds, wiped her hands clean on the calf's side and shooed it back outside to its mother, who promptly began to lick the salve off the calf.

Lalique sighed. "It wasn't until Brehani found the first calf caught in the canebrake that we found out what we were up against. We came off worse than the calf did, to tell you the truth." She managed to grin. "Figured we were *human* . . . we could handle a *plant*, for god's sake! We barged right into the canebrake. . . . Well, *that* was pure arrogance and we learned our lesson real fast. We wound up just as stuck as the calf, or maybe worse. Damn things practically snatched me bald—you can still see where the hair's growing back out!"

She parted her hair just enough to let me see a long pinkish-brown scar. Healing well but it must've hurt like hell at the time.

"I'd have called you about them sooner but—"

"Calving," I said. "You don't have time to think about anything else. Hasn't been all *that* long that I've forgotten what it's like, Lalique."

She smiled at me ruefully. "Let me put the worst of these to bed and then we'll get the cell samples from the last few calves."

I shook my head. "Just point out the ones that haven't been done, and tell me which of the calves needs special attention and what kind. We'll worry about your canebrake when the whole troop of you is rested—I need more information and just now I don't think I could get a coherent

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

word out of a one of them. —Bed for you too. Leo and I will see to what needs doing for a while."

"Thanks, Annie. I appreciate it."

"Hell," I told her, "I'm the one who appreciates it. Best thing I ever did was request a gene analyzer for you—you've been doing enough of my work, seems to me I can do a little of yours."

"Sure it's okay with Leo?"

I looked around. Leo had roused one of the kids—or Mabob had. Even though I hadn't heard a gronk, the kid couldn't have been staring at Mabob harder if he'd air-blasted him one.

Leo'd obviously been following the conversation. He called over, "I volunteer, Annie. It's a matter of family honor. Nikolai's asleep on his feet, so somebody's got to take over for him."

I should have known. The resemblance was unmistakable. Nikolai's crisply curled hair was darkest black where Leo's was pure white, and his brown skin was smooth where Leo's was crow's-footed and laugh-lined, but when the kid smiled—well, I could see where Leo got his crow's-feet and laugh-lines because the kid's face crinkled up in all the same places.

Nikolai came shakily forward and held out a hand—a huge one like Leo's. "Nikolai Opener Jembere," he said. "And you've got to be Annie Jason Masmajean. Sorry I missed the wedding."

I took the hand. He had Leo's handshake as well. "We can get acquainted later," I said. "I can see the family resemblance but just now you look a lot older than Leo. Get some sleep."

He burst into laughter and grinned at Leo. "Perfect! Makes perfect sense!"

Leo grinned and nodded back.

"You don't," I pointed out. "Go, get some sleep! Honest to God, you're a compulsive volunteer, just like your dad."

Nikolai turned to include Lalique in his grin. "Hey," he said, "they help me dig bones. The least I can do is help them birth calves!" Still grinning mischievously, he gave one last look at Mabob and stumbled off to the house.

"That was clear as mud," I told Leo, after he'd gone.

"Don't worry, Annie. He'll tell you *all* about it when he wakes up. In fact, you won't be able to stop him."

One thing Leo's a helluva lot better at than I am is patience. I'm always finding that out at the damndest times. He waited until it was just the three of us (I'm counting Mabob only because he shared our interest in everything new) and then he gave me a grin and said, "Out with it, Annie. Tell me all about these 'Earth authentic' cows."

I couldn't help laughing. "Aha!" I said. "*You've* been watching the 'westerns' in ships' files." Mabob rattled, too.

"I was hooked on them when I was a kid," Leo admitted. "Those cows are *big!* These cows are no bigger than sheep." He gestured at the mother

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the calf we were taking the cell sample from. "The lady there barely comes up to hip-high."

"But they are Earth authentic, Leo—as much as anything on Mirabile is, anyhow."

We moved on to the next stall to check on its newcomer. Mabob was getting on remarkably well with the cows, now that he seemed to understand he wasn't to bully them.

"They were breeding miniature cows back on Earth well before the Bad Years," I said. "Early transgenic work—some of the earliest, I think. Idea was to breed a cow that needed very little grazing space but still produced a lot of milk. That's the idea here too. Sorry—"

The calf had bawled a complaint—I hadn't hurt it, it was just complaining—and its mother glared and snorted, threatening me with a bruised thigh if I didn't leave her pride and joy alone.

Mabob stepped over and gave her a ferocious eye-blaze. I was surprised to note she didn't rate a bristle, but Mabob had judged it right. The eye-blaze was quite enough to quiet her down. I shooed the calf toward her and she settled for washing it head to toe.

"Thanks, Mabob. You could be useful." I gave Leo a speculative glance.

He shrugged. "We'll see."

Mabob preened, making a quiet little whistling noise somewhere in the back of his throat. All of a sudden the noise cut off. He looked anxiously from me to Leo and back again. Not the slightest doubt in my mind what that was about.

"That's okay, Mabob. I don't mind if you whistle." I reached out and scratched him where he liked to be scratched, just to let him know I meant it. He rattled and went back to the quiet whistling.

We moved on to the next stall. "Those cattle you saw in the westerns—they needed acres and acres of range. Couldn't feed 'em otherwise. Not only were they expensive but they were damn hard on any EC you put them into. These Guernseys—well, you could keep one in your yard. There'd be enough milk for the baby and for cheese besides. Once we get the herd stable enough, we'll hand them out to whatever town wants one or two."

"I like most goat cheeses," Leo said. "What's cow cheese taste like?"

"Ask Brehani. He's been experimenting with different kinds. He's probably *the* Mirabilan expert on the subject of cheese molds. Selima's been getting him a few new ones out of ships' stock every time she makes the trek into RightHere. So far he hasn't poisoned himself—or anybody else."

"Now that's reassuring."

"I thought so." I gave him my best grin. Must have been good enough, because we got to necking for a bit. This time we didn't have an audience, unless you count momma cow and her baby. Mabob, if my ears were any judge, was rummaging in a corner of the stall.

A minute later there was a hideous squeaking from the same direction. Sort of broke the mood, so we broke the clinch.

Mabob had a good-sized rat by the tail. The squealing was pure

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fury—flail as it might, that rat was *not* going to escape Mabob. He brought it, dangling and shrilling, over to where Leo and I stood arm in arm—I'd never seen a kid look prouder of a catch.

With an arch of the neck and a rattle of scales, he offered it to me. If I'd had gloves, I'd've accepted the damn thing on the spot and happily. Rats are a major problem—some idiot geneticist back on Earth must have liked 'em—stuck genes for 'em in too damn many other things. They're forever popping up. If it weren't for the fact that most of their offspring are nonviable Dragon's Teeth, the whole of Mirabile would be overrun by now.

I made enthusiastic noises at Mabob, told him what a good thing he was, scratched him even more—did my best to encourage his new-found skill. Finally I did my best to convince him I wasn't hungry but that I'd be honored if he'd eat it *for* me.

Leo looked doubtful. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Leo, *I* don't know what he can eat safely. But if he brought it as a present, *he* must consider it edible."

He considered it edible. He didn't let go of its tail, just bent his neck until the rat could scrabble at the ground, where he clubbed it neatly to death. Then he ripped it up and gobbled it down with obvious relish. When he was done, he preened smugly for a few moments, then stalked the corner of the stall—head down, eyes big as saucers—looking for seconds.

"Take him with you when you feed the preemies," I told Leo.

While Leo and Mabob made the rest of the rounds, I hunted up the analyzer to check out the cell samples I'd taken from the latest of the calves. Fed what I got into the computer, then linked up with the computer back at the lab to check out the few I didn't recognize off-hand. Not a dandelion among 'em, I was glad to see. And all of 'em were as stable as could be expected for Mirabile—more so, since we'd been working our asses off to keep them that way.

If the cows had been eating leaves from the canes, it hadn't hurt 'em any. Didn't poison 'em and didn't change the EC enough to encourage those hidden genes to produce something other than Guernsey.

Our problem with the Guernseys was that any EC good enough for Guernsey was likewise good enough for Holstein or longhorn. The Holstein would have satisfied Leo's idea of "cow," being the huge kind, and the longhorn was the actual article he'd seen in the westerns. We couldn't afford either kind, ecologically speaking.

So I checked the gene-reads on the preemies. One was the predictable Holstein. The other wasn't—predictable, I mean. Took me about five minutes to find a match in ships' records: bison. Like the Holstein, it needed more range than we could afford to give it. At least, we couldn't afford an entire *herd*.

I did a little scouting around ships' files, this time outside the genetics file. Only took me a minute to find out my memory served me correctly. If the bison lived, might be Lalique had a good trade item.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then I got down to the most interesting item on the agenda: the canes. By the time I had a gene-read on the screen, Leo was back. He took one look over my shoulder and said, "One of mine, then. Not yours."

It was native Mirabilan, all right. No doubt about that. "You mean you're not even willing to *share?* I'll trade you half my dandelions."

"I'd share anything with you, Annie—including the dandelions. Let me get a chair and you can tell me what the gene-read tells you. I'm nowhere near as good at reading them as you are. Not yet, at least."

While Leo got a chair, Mabob paused for a look at the screen. Obviously, he wasn't impressed. A moment later, he was back to hunting rats.

"He's *good* at that," Leo said. "He's caught five already."

"Deserves a medal for that, Leo. Watch out, or Lalique'll want to keep him."

A frown of concern crossed his face. "I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I'd better not tell her how efficient he is."

"Don't worry. He's *your* project. Furthermore, I don't want anybody else raising one until you've cleared it. When I put you in charge of Mirabilan wildlife, I meant just that."

The frown vanished. "Good. Now tell me what you can about these canes."

"They're carnivorous, for starters."

"Great planet. Not only have we got plants that commit arson, we've got meat-eaters as well."

"Mirabile's as Earth-like as they come," I said. "I grant you the vegetable life is a bit more enthusiastic here. . . . The canes don't restrict themselves to insects. They'll actually go for bigger game. But I'm betting they don't really mean to catch calves."

"They did."

"Sure, but even something that size might eventually struggle free. And damage the plants a good deal in the process. No, there's something we're missing here."

I waited for the horrible squeals in the background to die. Literally. Mabob had clubbed himself another rat.

That reminded me how quickly Mabob had learned to avoid touching the canes. "Maybe most of the Mirabilan wildlife knows enough to avoid the trap. The cows don't."

"The *older* cows do. They didn't go in after the calf—not even the calf's mother was willing to do that."

"Hmmm. But they eat the leaves off the canes, according to Jibril." I stared at the gene-read again, then I said, "I think staring at the gene-read isn't going to help us much on this one. We should be staring at the canes, to see what works in practice."

He nodded. "I wonder why Lalique was so sure they were Dragon's Teeth."

"Probably just because anything anybody on Mirabile doesn't appreciate *must* be."

The door opened. It was Roland. "Hi, Annie, Lalique says for me to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

take over and for you to come on up to dinner." He stared at Mabob, who downed a last bit of rat and then stared back. "Leo and—Mabob?—too, she says."

Mabob whistled and rattled and trotted over to offer him the tail end of the rat.

"Uh," said Roland, "Is that what I think it is?"

I grinned. "Yup, and if you want him to keep hunting 'em, you'd better thank him for the present—and mean it."

Turned out trapping rats was practically a full-time job in this neck of the woods—and Roland was the full-timer. So he did an all-out job of thanking Mabob. Mabob was still whistling and rattling as we left the barn and headed for the main house.

Once the door was closed behind us, though, Mabob charged ahead and let out three gronks in a row. Then he charged back to whistle at me, anxiously.

I had to laugh. "It's okay, Mabob. Outside, it's not so bad." So he beat us to the house, gronking all the way.

Lalique met us at the door. She'd had a few hours more sleep than the rest of them—that the rest were able to sleep through Mabob's gronking said it all about spring calving.

"Uh," said Lalique, "is he housebroken?"

"Yup." I grinned at Leo. "But tell him to 'hush' before you let him in. I think that'll save your hearing."

She did—and Mabob instantly simmered down to a quiet whistle. He was happy as a lark (though I've never seen anything in ships' files that would explain why larks are happier than anything else) with a whole new house to explore.

Lalique said, "So what's the verdict on the preemies, Annie?"

"One of 'em's veal."

"I thought as much. Well, at least we get a couple of good meals out of it. How about the other?"

"The funny-looking fuzzy one's a bison. Ask the Sioux Guild if they're in the market for a mascot. On the clear understanding that one is all they get—they're *not* breeding up to a herd."

"Hey! I can use that! Thanks, Annie."

She ushered us into the main room and saw us settled around the huge old dining table and dished out stew from the steaming pot in its center.

Her great-grandmother'd made that table the first year on Haffenhaff—and Lalique's family made things to last. I expect her seven-times-great-granddaughters will be eating around the same table. One of the reasons I like Lalique's family so much—a lot of respect for continuity.

That's what made me stop in mid-bite and look all around the room. For the first time in all the time I'd been coming out to Haffenhaff for calving, something had changed. Once I'd noticed the change consciously it wasn't hard to pick out just what. Against every wall, there was now a cabinet with a glass front. Must have been twenty of them, all made of the same warm silver-gray wood as the table—ballyhoo wood, prac-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tically fireproof. Thing is, every one of 'em was filled with what looked for all the world like rocks.

I swallowed. The stew was good, so I gave it a moment's proper attention before I waved my spoon at one of the cabinets and said, "Somebody take up geology?"

Lalique grinned. "Wrong field, Annie. Those aren't rocks, those are fossils that Nikolai and the kids dug out of the shale end of the island." The grin got wider. "And we're the Franz Nopcsa Museum of Natural History—at least, that's what the kids tell me. Of all the paleontologists they found in ships' files, they liked him best."

I worked on my stew while I thought about that. When I opened my mouth, what came out was exactly what I'd been thinking. "I'm a damned idiot. Never occurred to me that Mirabile would have fossils, too. The things you don't think of! Any planet with life would have fossils." Which explained Nikolai's comment about digging bones. "What sort of things have you found?" I was half-way out of my chair.

Lalique motioned me back down. "Wait for Nikolai. He's 'curator.' He'll give you the grand tour." She looked across the table at Leo. "Do you know? I think this has all the makings of a new guild: the folks who are interested in it are fanatical, it has a separate history with its own heroes, and it even has its own language. 'Curator'—that's guild tongue for 'the guy that keeps track of it all.' What more do you need for a guild?"

Leo smiled and raised his hands to shrug. That was enough to bring Mabob to his side.

"Oh!" said Lalique. "*I* don't have any social graces. Should I offer your friend a bowl of stew?"

Leo had already fished a bit of meat out of his bowl to offer Mabob a taste. Mabob accepted with a delicacy I'd never have expected, given the ferocious aspects of that beak. He whistled quietly for what would have been several sentences' worth in a human tongue, then he laid the tidbit just as delicately beside Leo's bowl.

Leo scratched Mabob's eye rims. " 'Thank you, but I'm not hungry right now,' " he translated for Lalique, though it couldn't have been plainer if Mabob *had* used a human tongue. Mabob went back to his exploring and Leo went back to his stew.

"Wouldn't be important to you, Annie," Leo said. "That's why you didn't think of it. You've got live Dragon's Teeth to worry about—what's a fossil to you?"

"You never know," I said. "I've got the interaction between Mirabilan life and Gaian life to worry about. Seems to me I've got a use for anybody who studies Mirabilan life—even if it's the rock solid kind. Besides, you know how nosy I am."

"Dragon's Tooth," said Lalique, changing the subject back to one of more immediate interest. To her, at least.

"Nope," I said. "It's not. That one's purely Mirabilan. Which is why I brought my Mirabilan expert along." I blew Leo a kiss and got back to my stew.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But, Annie, it *can't* be Mirabilan," Lalique said.

So I asked Leo's question for him. "Why not?"

"Because it wasn't here before we settled here, that's why not." She pushed away from the table and darted into the next room. Over her shoulder, she called, "I can prove it."

Leo raised an eyebrow at me. I shrugged and took the opportunity to finish my stew. If Lalique had a bee in her bonnet, it sure as hell wasn't an Earth authentic one.

When she came back, she was struggling under the weight of three enormous books. Leo hastily shoved the stew bowls aside and made a place for her to thump them down between us. "Grandaddy Renzo's 'botanizing' books," she said. "See for yourself."

I was impressed already. The volumes were hand-bound—you could see the love that had gone into the work. I was almost afraid to breathe on them, let alone touch them. Lalique must have seen that in my expression, because she chuckled and said, "Built to last, Annie. Go ahead. They're not fragile."

Even so, I couldn't help but treat 'em with the respect they deserved. I opened the top one at random and found myself face to face with a sketch of a stick-me-quick plant, from the highest burr to the most delicate bits of its root system. A smaller sketch to the right showed the flower, from three different angles. To the left, another sketch showed a cutaway of one of the burrs and a cutaway of one of the flowers. The drawing was so meticulous that anyone could have identified a living example from its sketch without the slightest doubt or hesitation.

I whistled my admiration and turned the page. Handwritten, this one was—neat and clear—and the text was as meticulous as the sketches had been. "STICK-ME-QUICK," it read, "called 'the nasties' in the town of Gogol. Grows only in areas with a great deal of sunlight."

It went on for a full page about the habits (time of year it flowered, time of year it seeded) and needs (sunlight, speculation on lime in soil) of the stick-me-quick, even to including a list of the animals (Mirabilan *and* Gaian) Lalique's grandaddy had seen carrying the burrs. Last on the list was "Humans." Right all the way—I'd picked enough of the damn things out of my hide to sympathize—bet Renzo had found that out the same way the rest of us had.

I turned another page. The next sketch was a small flowering plant I'd never seen. The text on the following page included a note that crushed leaves from this one were a very effective salve for burns.

I'd've been just as happy to spend the rest of the evening leafing through the volumes. Luckily, there were more than one so I didn't have to fight Leo for possession.

"I've got seventy-five years' worth of botanizing books, Annie," Lalique said. "Renzo was a completist. Orlando took up the hobby as well and, between them, they covered the island—they even included any Earth authentics that showed up."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She pulled out the bottom volume to show me some of Orlando's work—it was a slightly different style but just as meticulous.

She closed the book and slapped the cover. "*That's* why the canes have got to be Dragon's Teeth. There isn't a sign of one until *after* we started raising cattle here."

Opening the volume again, she scanned the index, then displayed a page. There was the cane. The sketch was Renzo's work. "First I've seen," read the notes. "I looked for more but haven't found any." It was dated some twenty-five years back.

While Leo and I read the rest of it (it included five pages of sketches of the various things grandaddy had found stuck to the canes), Lalique opened yet another of the volumes.

"Twenty-five years ago," she said, "there was one cane. Twenty years ago, there were four." She thrust the open volume at us for proof. "Now, they're all over the place. And the only other new thing on Haffenhaff is the Guernseys!"

"Doesn't mean they're related." I laid the volumes aside—would have done so grudgingly if Leo hadn't been so eager to get them all to himself—and went to the computer. "Give a look at the gene-read. See for yourself."

While I called up the gene-read I'd done on the canes, the household was starting to revive around us. Brehani and Villamil peered over my shoulder at the monitor until Lalique shooed them off to eat. It was Orlando who said it though—he took one look at the gene-read on the screen and said, "Well, *that's* not Earth authentic . . . whatever it is."

"That's your canebrake," I said.

"Damn! So how'd they get here—swim? And why hasn't anybody else I've asked seen one?" Orlando turned and said to Mabob, "Good god! You're real! I thought I'd dreamed you!"

Mabob whistled and rattled; it was a lot like static in the background.

"Maybe they floated," I said. "Or they might have been spread by, oh, chatterboxes. We'll have to take a closer look at their seeding habits before we can make any kind of a guess." I reached out to show Orlando where to scratch Mabob for best results. "It *is* odd that nobody's seen one before—did you mean that?"

Orlando took over scratching Mabob. "Maybe it's not so odd, Annie. I've never seen one of *him* before, either."

"Lots of them—huge flocks of them—out by Roaring Falls," said Leo. Then he added, "But, you know, Annie—*I've* never seen canes like those before either. And I've probably seen more of Mirabile than most people will ever expect to."

"Except maybe me," said Nikolai. He was heaping stew into his bowl. "Tell you the truth, Leo: I've never seen any of those canes before either. I'd've bet anything they were Earth imports. That doesn't mean there aren't any, of course, just that they're certainly not common. They're not the sort of thing you'd forget—not after they've stripped hide off you, anyhow."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

That reminded me. "Speaking of stripping hide off—Lalique, Orlando, *somebody*, tell me: Why in *hell* aren't these botanizing books in ships' files?"

Orlando blinked at me. "It's just a hobby, Annie. Grandaddy Renzo taught me when I was a kid—it's just something we do for the fun of it."

Hopeless. I shook my head, wishing I could get Mabob to give him one good gronk, rotten breath and all. "Right. It's a hobby. You do for fun what Leo gets paid to do—"

"Also for fun," Leo put in. "But Annie's right, Orlando. Every one of these books is worth its weight in gold to me. All this information ought to be in ships' records." He glanced at me. "Think we can get funds from Sabah for him?"

"Wait a minute!" That was Orlando again. "No, Leo. *No*, Annie. You want to turn it into a job. I won't have that. Take the information, fine. Load it into ships' files, also fine, but—I won't have my hobby spoiled."

Savitri, who was all of eleven, and consequently already recovered from the ordeal of calving, said, "I could load them into ships' files." She looked up at Orlando. "I can't draw like you and great-grandaddy Renzo—loading your pictures in could be *my* hobby. I'd *like* that!"

Orlando laid a hand on Savitri's shoulder and smiled *big*. "It's settled then, Annie. My hobby is sketching, and Savitri's is loading."

"I take it," I said to Savitri, "that getting paid for the work would spoil your hobby, too?"

She nodded solemnly.

"Expected as much," I said. "Like father, like daughter." That got me a matched set of smiles. "But there's something else I need done as well—and since it's not part of the hobby, you might consider asking a piece-work fee. If you're willing to do it."

"Tell me what it is."

Sensible kid. Find out what's up before you commit yourself. "I *also* need a gene-read for each and every plant in the botanizing books. Means you'd have to collect a sample of each one and run it through the analyzer and add *that* to ships' files as well."

Her eyes went wide. "You mean, be a jason? Like you?"

"An assistant jason, for a start. Leo can show you how to use the analyzer. If it turns out you're good at it, I can *always* use another jason on the team."

She stared at me for a long moment. Then she plucked at Orlando's sleeve. He leaned over and the two of them held a whispered conversation. I tried to keep dead-pan, but with everybody *else* in the room grinning I didn't stand a chance.

A moment later, they broke the huddle, grinning themselves.

"Okay," said Savitri. "I've decided. It's a hobby for now. But if I'm good at it, Annie, then I get to be a jason and you get to pay me."

"Fair enough," I said, and stuck out my hand. "Shake on the deal." We did. I turned to Leo and said, "You just got yourself seventy-five years worth of research *and* an assistant, to boot."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's about time," said Leo. "You can't expect me to handle the whole planet by myself."

He could handle teaching Savitri how to use the analyzer, though, and he was clearly loving every minute of it, too. Nothing beats the feeling of having learned a thing so well you can pass it on. Unless it's maybe watching somebody you've taught teach the next one—too bad Susan wasn't around to see him.

Meanwhile, I got the grand tour of the fossil collection. Made me start grumbling about hopelessness all over again. To Nikolai, I said, "And why isn't all *this* in ships' files? Do I have to hold *everybody's* hand around here?"

Nikolai chuckled. If I hadn't seen him do it, I'd have misheard it for Leo's chuckle and I just about forgave him right there. But not quite.

"I haven't had the time, Annie. I scarcely get enough time off to dig for them, let alone—"

"Right. You get savaged by a pack of grumblers your next trip out and all that information in that thick skull"—I tapped him, none too gently, just behind the ear—"is gone forever. Now, what kind of notes have you got on all this?"

"Private file on the computer. Sketchy notes."

I must've growled. He held up both hands, just like Leo does when I give him the same look.

"Okay. I'll dump my private file to ships' files first thing in the morning."

"And . . . ?" I got a quizzical look for that. Seems like I've got to spell everything out for this crowd. "And you will also read through the notes, adding explanatory glosses wherever they're needed."

"Oh," he said. "'*And?* Yes, that too. Far be it from me to ruin our friendship before it gets off the ground. Leo'd have my ears."

"Only one," I told him. "I'd get the other. We share."

He chuckled again, and I had to grin back at him. Leo's got great genes. I like 'em wherever they turn up.

"Come on," he said. "Let me show you our best find so far."

He snatched up a flashlight (not that he really needed one, it being a nova-lit night) and lead me out to what the Imbambas dubbed "the Behind House." When the family'd overflowed the house that Granddaddy Renzo built, he built a second. Pretty soon now, they'd need a third. Since I appreciate the Imbamba genes too, the sooner the better. The cheerups singing their nightly question-and-answer sounded as if they agreed with me, which is one reason I like to listen to the cheerups sing.

I took my time following Nikolai. You can't be in a hurry when the cheerups are singing—and when every breath brings you the smell of roses. Lalique's farm is the only place on Mirabile I get to smell the roses. It almost made me sorry I'd missed the calving this year.

Could be Leo's patience is something he came by later on in life, because

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you'd have thought Nikolai didn't know the meaning of the word. By the time we reached Behind House, he was fairly bouncing with anticipation.

The Behind House had grown as many fossil cabinets as the main house had—all the more reason for a third, I thought. Nikolai didn't stop at the common room, though. He marched me on down to the room where he was guesting. No, I realized, Nikolai was a permanent member of the family. The room was purely his.

Smack-dab in the middle of the floor stood a—well, it was an eight-foot-high skeleton. Nikolai swung out an arm toward it and said, "There!" As if I might have missed something that size if he hadn't pointed it out to me.

I got in close to look. Took me a minute to realize what I was looking at. It was fossil bones—all strung together on a wire armature—as if he meant to bring the critter back to life. Took me another full minute to realize Nikolai's critter was some long-dead relative of Mabob's. Or near enough.

"Now I know why Leo wanted you to meet Mabob," I said. I kept looking at Mabob's thousand-times-great grandaddy. Something was wrong. Could have been a change in skeletal structure between then and now but . . .

"Yeah," said Nikolai. "I'd give just about anything for a look at Mabob's skeleton."

"Don't you dare," I said. "Lay a finger on Mabob and—"

He raised his hands again. "I meant: I'll ask somebody in that neighborhood to save me the skeleton if they come across a dead one."

Good thing we understood each other. I went back to my puzzle. It needed closer examination, so I dropped to one knee to look at it. "You've got it mounted wrong," I said, pointing to the knee joint.

He dropped to a knee beside me so fast it was worth a bruise. "What?"

"Look here. Mirabilan animals—at least the ones I've seen the carcasses of—have ligaments the way we do. This is clear enough that these"—I stuck a finger on the most obvious of them—"must be where the ligaments attach. Follow that to here and you've got a critter that stands *exactly* like Mabob. No hunch, no pigeon-toes. See what I mean?"

That made it even taller than before and the head wasn't nearly as large as Mabob's, but on the whole it would look even more Mabob-like than it did now.

"Yes! You're right! Annie, I could kiss you."

"Sorry, you're too young for me."

He chuckled again. "Here," he said, "hold this a minute."

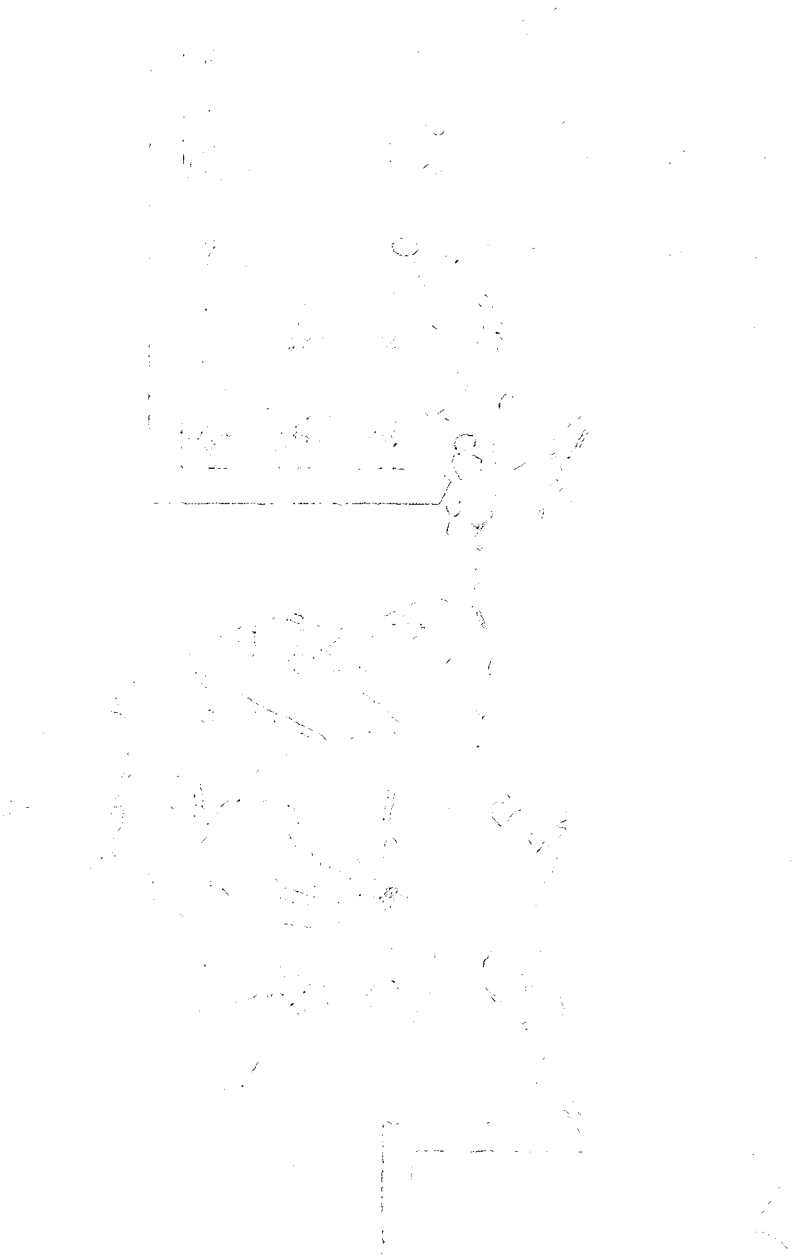
He meant to take the damn thing apart and put it back together again that very moment.

Last thing *I* wanted to do was spend all night holding bits of bone together. I stuck my hands behind my back and said, "Not a chance."

He looked so broken-hearted, I almost gave in. "No," I said, as much to me as to him. "You're tired. You need sleep."

That brought out the stubborn in him. I should've known there'd be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a lot of stubborn there, given the genes. I've got my share of stubborn too so I put it to work. "Never mess with delicate stuff when you're tired. You can do it *right* in the morning—after you've had a good night's rest and a good breakfast. And after you get those notes into ships' files for me."

"Reasonably stubborn," he said. "That's what Leo told me you were. Now I get it. As opposed to *un*reasonably stubborn. Okay. Sleep first, breakfast first. . . ." He grinned all of Leo's laugh-lines and added, "After that, we'll argue."

"You're on," I said. I got to my feet. Couldn't resist giving him a pat on the cheek. Definitely Leo's kid—took it just in the spirit in which it was given. If he noticed I copped his flashlight so he'd have to settle for the night, he didn't say a word.

Or maybe he remembered he didn't need one—I didn't bother to turn it on.

Outside, I took another deep breath, appreciating all over again. Somewhere out in the field, Mabob gronked enthusiastically. The cheerups were startled into momentary silence—then they took up their chant with twice the energy they'd had before.

Occurred to me suddenly that I'd misled Leo earlier in the day. Well, it was easy enough to correct. I stopped along the walk and helped myself to a single "Aimee Vibert." Its misty white petals were luminous in the nova-light.

When I walked into the main house, Leo was alone in the common room. Guess the others had all gone off for their much-needed sleep—the ones that weren't on duty in the barn with the bison, that is. "Hello again, Annie," said Leo, and he gave me a kiss to go with it. "What have you done with Mabob?"

"Not a thing," I said. "He's outside terrorizing the cheerups. I assumed you turned him loose for a little exercise. Hope that means he'll let us sleep tonight."

"Somebody turned him loose but it wasn't me. I don't suppose he can get into too much trouble by himself."

"Unless he goes back to terrorizing the bulls."

"I doubt that," Leo said. "You seem to have put the fear of God—or at least the fear of Annie—into him, on that *and* the gronking."

"I'll settle for the fear of Annie." Damned if that man doesn't always bring out smiles in me. Content and smug, that's me. Then I remembered what had been on my mind only a moment or so before.

"Leo, I misled you earlier—"

"Right down the garden path," he said. "And there's no getting rid of me now."

"I refuse to bite. When we were talking about 'Earth-authentic' cows . . ."

"That, what with the encrypted extra genes, *nothing* on Mirabile is Earth-authentic?" He held out his hand by way of demonstration. "I am."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was too good to resist. I laid the rose in his palm, all velvety white against the brown. "And so is 'Aimee Vibert.' "

"Beautiful," he said, looking from me to the rose and back again. Leo has the damndest priorities, and don't think I don't appreciate them!

"When the Mirabilan expedition left Earth, each of the expedition members got ten pounds weight allotment for 'frivolous' possessions."

"I didn't know that! No, wait—I guess I did but I never thought about it. That would account for the Earth-bound copy of the poems of W.B. Yeats that's in my family."

"That would account for it, all right. In Lalique's family the ten pounds 'frivolous' were ten pounds of rose-cuttings. Dunno how they did it but they kept the damn things alive the entire trip. And now they grow all over Haffenhaff."

I brushed the edge of one perfect petal with my fingertip. "The thing is, because they were cuttings, they *don't* have any hidden genes tucked away in them. What's more: that's a clone. That's what a rose grown from a cutting is. You hold in your hand not a descendent but an actual piece of the original plant that grew on Earth."

That made him look down at the rose again.

"Smell it," I said and, when he did, he smiled and so did I. "That's what Earth smelled like," I said.

Still holding the rose delicately in his huge hand, he pulled me close and inhaled deeply. "And like you," he said. "Earth must have been one *hell* of a romantic world."

Mabob woke us bright and early, gronking outside our window. Still, it was *outside*, not inside, so I could hardly complain—beyond the few obligatory curses, that is.

Leo woke enough to chuckle. "I do believe you're mellowing, Annie. You didn't throw anything at him."

"If I'm mellowing either it's a) because of you, or b) because I had enough extra hands on the team this year that I *didn't* have to help with lambing or calving."

"I vote for a)," he said. "But, knowing you, more likely it's b). I've heard you snarling over those red dandelions."

I snarled at the mere thought. I had at least two hundred more dandelion gene-reads waiting for me back at the lab. Not to mention any *more* that might have flowered red since I'd left.

Leo grinned. "See? Can't be me. Let's go look at the canebrake."

"Let's. *Anything* but red dandelions."

After breakfast, we headed out for the nearest stand of canes, Mabob tagging along behind—*and* in front *and* to the side—wherever the spirit took him. What with the gronking and the rattling and the strutting and the preening and the occasional hunt for small edibles in the grass, it was clear he was having the time of his life.

We found the clearing Lalique and Jibril had cut in the canebrake and eased our way carefully into it. Mabob hung around long enough to make

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sure we were being careful, then wandered away to do some exploring of his own. Just as well. I wanted to watch the behavior of the animals in the brake, and having a predator the size of Mabob around would surely have given me a skewed view.

We spread a blanket (no need to sacrifice *all* of our comfort) and settled down to wait and watch. With Leo, waiting and watching is not just an art, it's a full pleasure. So hardship didn't come into the job anywhere, except maybe for the lumps that were etching themselves into my butt.

If I'd correctly identified the cane I'd been looking at the day before, then the absorption process was spectacularly fast—the Earth authentic bug had vanished but for a bit of wingtip.

First thing I learned, watching the wind whip the leaves around, was that the leaves didn't stick to the canes. A light rain made it equally clear that the glue wasn't water-solvent. Should've known that. If it had been, Lalique would have washed the calf down to free it. Still, if the leaves didn't stick, then might be we could make a solvent out of *them*.

Leo tapped my arm and pointed further into the brake. A fuzzwilly was building a nest—first time I'd ever seen one build on the ground. Fuzzwillies are strange even by Mirabilan standards. They're 90 percent fluff and, ordinarily, they "hatch" their eggs by rolling them out of the nest to drop them on the ground and break them open. If you saw the thickness of the shells, you'd understand why. No way the baby fuzzwilly could make it through that shell on its own. Still, they lose a lot of young every year in the process. Looked like the fuzzwillies were headed up an evolutionary dead-end.

But here was one of them building her nest on the ground. Damn straight I was interested!

I was even more interested when the fuzzwilly brushed against one of the canes, got pulled up short, gave a little shiver that made it look like a dandelion-head about to blow away and then *walked away*, leaving only a long silky tuft of hair stuck to the cane.

Hair's protein too—mine *and* the fuzzwilly's. The cane could probably absorb nutrients just as well from the fuzzwilly's hair as from the insects it caught. Even Mabob's scale—

"Yike!" I said, startling the fuzzwilly back into the canebrake. "Up, Leo! Get up! Out, out!"

We scurried out. I checked the grass, then sat and patted a bit beside me for Leo to share.

"What did I miss, Annie?"

"Same thing I missed." I turned the blanket over—the under side looked like clothes moths had been at it. Sure enough, the lumps I'd been sitting on *had* been etching their way into my butt.

I made a rude gesture to indicate the canes. "I bet that's *not* a stand of canes. I bet that's all *one* cane—like Earth authentic bamboo. The interconnecting runners may not be sticky, but they can digest whatever's lying on them. So if they *do* catch something big, they can absorb it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Pleasant thought," said Leo. "For once, I'm glad we didn't get carried away."

"For once, so am I." I grinned back at him. "I prefer a nice soft bed myself anyhow." I went back to watching the canebrake. "Now I believe Lalique when she says the canes have been here only since the cattle have. I don't know *why*, but it's a good bet she's right."

"I don't get it."

"The fuzzwillies. They're adapted to live in canes like these—*not* in trees. But when have you ever seen a fuzzwilly nest on the ground?"

"Never," said Leo. His brows knit ferociously and then, like sun coming out, all the laugh-lines came back. "Good lord! I get it! The fuzzwillies are mostly hair—so *they* don't get stuck to the canes. They just shrug off the stuck hair and go on their merry way. Meanwhile, the sticky canes keep most of the predators away from their nests."

Not Mabob, though. He had expendable scales, the way the fuzzwillies had expendable fuzz. Made me wonder just how many Mirabilan critters would come apart in your hands. But for now it was the fuzzwillies that interested me most.

I said to Leo, "And . . . ?"

"And? You mean there's more?"

"Come on, Leo. . . . Think of those damn thick-shelled eggs."

His jaw dropped. "The canes—the canes digest enough of the shell so the baby fuzzwilly can break its own way out!"

"Bet you're right. We'll stop back about egg-rolling time and see if we can catch them in the act."

Leo rubbed his shoulder. "Better here than somewhere in the woods, especially if you're right."

I had to raise an eyebrow at that. And at the shoulder he was rubbing.

He gave me a chuckle. "Eggrolling time always brings back memories of sore shoulder. A mama fuzzwilly dropped her egg on *me* once. My shoulder didn't so much as crack the egg, but I had a bruise the size of a fist for a week." The chuckle got deeper. "I had to take a rock to the egg to crack out the baby for its mama. It was hardly her fault something soft walked under her tree at just the wrong moment."

All I could do was smile at him. Damn but I love that man!

After a while, he said, "So tell me why you believe Lalique now."

"Oh, sorry. Look, I thought the fuzzwillies were going up an evolutionary dead-end, what with shells so thick the babies can't hatch. But if the shells originally co-adapted to life in a canebrake, then where have the canes been all this time that the fuzzwillies had to learn a new trick to 'hatch' their babies?"

"You're saying the egg-dropping trick is the only thing that keeps the species going where there aren't any canes for them to live in?"

"I'm saying that's my best guess. Come on, let's ask Lalique what egg-dropping time has been like since her family's been on Haffenhaff."

I collected a handful of leaves from widely spread canes; I also wanted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to check my theory that the stand was all one cane. Leo hollered up Mabob and we started for the house.

We hadn't gone more than a few yards when the ground started vibrating underfoot. I'd felt that before. "Stampede, Leo, headed our way. Grab Mabob—and watch your toes!"

Leo nodded, snatched up Mabob, and the two of us braced ourselves. Here they came, looked like the whole damn herd at once. And they were spooked, no doubt about it. There couldn't have been a single loose thought in one of those tossing heads. From somewhere behind them, I heard one of Lalique's kids bellowing, "Stampede! Watch your toes! Stampede!"

Two of the bulls—in the lead of the panic retreat of course—were bellowing even louder than the kid.

The challenge was too much for Mabob. He kicked his way out of Leo's arms and charged the closest Guernsey, gronking at the top of his lungs. Then Leo was after him, bellowing at the top of his, which is pretty impressive.

If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. I charged after Leo and Mabob yelling at the top of *my* lungs.

I like to think that did it—but I suspect Mabob's fevered gronks would have been sufficient. The herd panicked all over again, split right down the middle, and flowed around the three of us like the Omigolly around Haffenhaff.

The moment they passed by, I got a taste of what had set them off. More than a taste—I spat out a mouthful of the swarming horrors and swatted another hundred or so away from my eyes. Damndest, most irritating—a huge cloud of the tiny insect-like natives swarmed after the herd. Over the plaints of the cows and the whirring of the swarming horrors, I could hear Leo cursing inventively.

Gunnar skidded to a halt beside us, spat out a mouthful of his own and said, "You folks okay?"

We did a quick check. Leo'd gotten a bruised shin and I'd gotten my foot stepped on but aside from that and the damn bugs in our faces, we were fine.

Mabob loved every minute of it. (The swarming horrors didn't seem to horrify him at all. In fact, they ignored him. Must've been the orange eyes that did it.) He was still gronking insults at the Guernseys long after they'd passed us by. If Leo had let go of him, he'd have chased them right into the Omigolly.

As it was, the herd came to a screeching halt just before the canebrake. The Guernseys weren't so stupid after all. "Come on, Leo. I want a closer look."

He spat a few dozen swarming horrors out of his mouth. "Sometimes, Annie, I don't know why I go along with you."

But he did, gave me a hand even as I hobbled into the thick of the swarming horrors. It was tough trying to look and keeping them out of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

your eyes at the same time but little by little they stopped bothering us altogether.

I pushed my way through the now-quiet herd (I wanted to step on a few feet myself—by way of revenge—but I resisted the temptation) to the edge of the canebrake. Sure enough, those cows weren't all that stupid. And the canebrake was having a feast. The canes were black from top to bottom with the swarming horrors, all stuck and all on the way to being trace elements in the canes' diet.

I was betting the hole Jibril and Lalique had made in the brake would be filled with new growth in two weeks' time or less.

We stayed long enough to make sure none of the calves got themselves stuck, then we slowly made our way back to the house.

Savitri was in the common room, using her free time to load Renzo's notebooks into ships' files. Boundless energy, these kids. Made her happy enough to do it that she was whistling to herself as she went from page to page. Mabob perked up, strutted over and whistled back.

Surprised her. She looked up, grinning, then her mouth made a little tiny "o." "Hi, Mabob. I thought you were Orlando—he always whistles back at me, too."

Which earned her another whistle from Mabob. Any minute, they'd work up to flute duos.

I decided to get my question in while they were still tuning up. "Savitri, what's egg-dropping time like around this neck of the woods?"

"I dunno, Annie. I've never seen one."

"We saw a fuzzwilly down by the canebrake—"

"Oh, yeah. *Lots* of fuzzwillies down there. They nest in the canes. I meant, I've never seen a fuzzwilly drop its eggs. I've never even seen one nest in a tree. Orlando and Lalique warned us all about egg-rolling time but"—she looked a little bit embarrassed—"I don't see why they worry."

That was better confirmation than I'd hoped. "Good," I said.

Startled her, I guess, because her eyes got huge. "Why good? That's mean, Annie."

So I'm an idiot. Doesn't usually take me that long to figure out why a kid should be embarrassed about a fuzzwilly's nesting habits. "Hey, kiddo! I didn't mean Orlando and Lalique were wrong. I think your fuzzwillies are different from everybody else's."

I laid a hand on the shoulder Leo'd been rubbing. "And if you want to hear about the hazards of egg-dropping time, just ask Leo. He got himself clobbered by one!"

If Leo'd been egged, that made it okay, to judge from Savitri's relief. That meant her parents still knew everything. And why should I be the one to tell her different? She was coming up on the age where she'd find out soon enough for herself.

"Would you tell me about getting egged, Leo?" Savitri said. "And would you check my gene-reads to see I did them right?"

"You go ahead," I told him. "I'm going to hunt up some of the older members of the troop and get myself a little historical perspective."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Easy enough to do, all right. And it fit my theory like a glove. In Lalique's childhood, egg-dropping time had been so hazardous you didn't dare walk in the woods without carrying a board to protect your head. "Even that wasn't enough," Lalique said. She held up a little finger. I'd never noticed before—it was as crooked as a griffbramble twig. "I was holding a board over my head, so the egg hit my hand and busted up my finger. It hurt like hell just about forever. I still get twinges when the weather's about to change."

"And now?" I asked.

Lalique and Orlando looked at each other, suddenly puzzled as all hell.

It was Jibril that answered. "Now the fuzzwillies nest in the canebrake, Annie. That's why nobody gets egged any more."

Trust the kids to investigate a menace more thoroughly than the adults. I grinned at him. "Okay, Jibril—when was the last time you saw a fuzzwilly nest in a tree and what was the first year you saw them nest in the canes?"

"I never saw them nest in a tree. Orlando and Lalique are always talking about it but . . . you know how grownups worry."

After that, it didn't take me long to establish that the canes and the fuzzwillies went together. It had taken the fuzzwillies a couple of years to relearn ground-nesting but, once they had, you couldn't get 'em back in a tree for love or money.

Lalique eyed her crooked finger. "Maybe I *don't* want those canes done away with, after all."

"Maybe not," I agreed. "Cows use 'em to shelter from the swarming horrors."

"They do?" said Orlando. "I was going to ask you for some of those bats—it's not just about the swarming horrors, Annie. We've got a lot of biting insects that bother the Guernseys. Some kind of black fly that drives them nuts."

Which I'd also seen stuck to one of the canes, if he meant the kind I thought he did. "I'll put you on the list for bats," I said, "but meanwhile you ought to have a look at those canes. They're already doing some of the job for you."

"Uh, Annie?" That was Lalique again. "If the fuzzwillies prefer to live in the canes, maybe *they* brought the seeds."

"Nice try," I said, "but we've got fuzzwillies all over the place and nobody's seen canes like yours. You said so yourself."

"Besides," said Jibril, "the fuzzwillies don't eat the cane seeds."

"What does?" I asked him.

"The Guernseys." He laughed. "You can't keep them away from the canebrake at seeding time." He glanced at Orlando. "It doesn't seem to give us Dragon's Teeth, anymore than the fact they eat the cane leaves does."

Orlando nodded agreement.

"So what else eats cane seeds?"

The whole troop went at it and I wound up with a list of maybe twenty

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

critters, all Mirabilan, that did. With that many, the canes ought to have been able to spread themselves far and wide. Only they hadn't—and the fuzzwillies that didn't live on Haffenhaff were still dropping eggs on heads, hands and shoulders as a late-spring ritual.

"I think that's all of them, Annie," said Lalique, "but you could check the botanizing books to see if anybody spotted anything else eating the cane seeds."

"And I'll have to stop by next time they seed—I'll want a look at the seeds for myself."

"Oh, that you can do now. Get Savitri to show you where the samples are."

"Samples?"

"The ones that go with the books," Orlando explained. "Renzo and I kept a sample of everything we sketched. I never could figure out how to press a sample of the cane itself—it stuck to everything I tried—but there's a pressed leaf and a boxful of seeds."

Hopeless, I tell you. No point asking him why he hadn't mentioned it last night—he hadn't mentioned it last night because I hadn't asked him. Besides, it was a hobby, so how could it be important?

"I'll go look," I snarled. Stomped out before I took up a hobby of my own—wringing necks.

As I headed back to the house, I met up with Mabob. He was stalking something in the grass again, so I stopped to watch. Didn't want to interrupt his snack. Turned out it was another rat, so it was just as well I hadn't.

After he'd finished gobbling it down, he spotted me and gronked a greeting that sent me staggering back a step.

"Hello to you, too," I said. This time he whistled back at me, which was a pleasant change because whistling didn't involve a blast of rat-breath. I unlatched the door and held it open, waiting. "Want in?"

Nope. He whistled, at length and earnestly, then he strutted off toward the barn. When he got about a hundred yards away, he turned back and gronked.

I laughed. "Okay," I called back, "Have a good gronk!"

"Hi, Annie," said Leo. "Is Mabob with you?"

"Last I saw, he was headed for the barn—or at least for space to gronk in. —Leo? You telling me *you* didn't let him out?"

He shook his head. "Savitri? Did you let Mabob out?" He had to ask a second time before Savitri looked up from her task and shook her head as well.

"Door unlatched?" he suggested.

I thought back. Shook my head the same way they'd both done a moment before. Lot of that going around.

Leo went over to the door and pushed it. It didn't unlatch. Then he turned the handle, opened the door and let it swing. Out, in—I heard the snick of the latch as it closed. "Aha!" said Leo. "That solves that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Maybe," I said. "Certainly enough Earth authentic critters learn how to open doors. Keep your eye on him, though. If he can, I want to know about it."

Leo flashed me that best grin of his. "You're not the only one. I like a little privacy myself every once in a while."

I grinned back. Then I turned to Savitri and said, "Where do you keep the samples that go with the botanizing books? I need some seeds from the canes."

Leo gave me a wondering look. "Samples, too?!"

I snarled in the affirmative.

Leo chuckled. "It's times like these that I understand your disposition."

Which was quite enough to make me chuckle back at him. Took me a minute to realize that Savitri was waiting politely at my elbow to show me the stores of samples. "Sorry, kiddo," I said. "Leo's always distracting me."

She giggled. "That's what Orlando says about Lalique. He says some day I'll get distracted, too." She gave me a thoughtful look. "I hope so; it looks like fun."

"That it is," I assured her. "Now, let's go see those samples before it gets out of hand."

She giggled again and led the way into the bedroom Lalique and Orlando shared.

Every wall had a storage cabinet shoved up against it—the cabinets they'd made for Nikolai's fossils were a simple variation on the theme. Damned if the entire household hadn't been a museum of natural history *long* before their pet paleontologist had gotten into the act!

Savitri stuck a finger to her lips. "Canes," she said, pondering the rows and rows of small drawers. "They'd be . . . *here!*" Triumphantly, she pulled open a drawer, scooped out a handful of seeds and held them out to me.

Each was about half an inch long, wrinkled brownish-red. The actual seed, I was betting, was inside the wrinkled skin of the berry. "You didn't give me all of them, did you?"

"Course not," said Savitri. "Do you *need* all of them? I could ask Orlando if it's okay."

I shook my head. "No need. I was just making sure you left enough for the collection."

"Absolutely. Always." She said it with that utter solemnity only a kid that age is capable of.

Couldn't help but grin at her. "I think you've got the makings of a *very* good jason," I told her—and got a grin in return.

"Then I better get back to work," she said—and did.

"Corrupting the young again, I see," Leo said.

"Ha! In a family with some seventy years of 'botanizing' books? Who needs to corrupt? I'd put the whole bunch of them on the payroll tomorrow if they'd let me."

"I'm *on* the payroll, Annie. And you're hogging my seed samples."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I gave him half. Wasn't about to turn over the entire puzzle to him and he very well knew it. It was that or dandelions—and I wasn't ready to go back to the dandelions just yet.

After a bit of necking, we sauntered back into the common room, pulled chairs up to the dining table and started poking at the cane seeds to see how they poked back.

Interesting results. Inside the fruit, the cane seed was every bit as hard as a fuzzwilly's egg.

"That makes sense," said Leo. "If the seed drops on the ground, the cane will eat through it the same way. Once it's been etched, the sprout should have no trouble germinating, even through that thick a seed."

"Only one problem with that," I said. "The damn thing's got fruit—which means it's meant to attract animals to eat the fruit and spread the seed by elimination. And it can't expect the animal to eliminate all the seeds where it or another cane could do the necessary etching."

"Maybe that explains why the canes are so few and far between."

"Maybe. But not why they've suddenly become common enough to be a nuisance—if they *are* a nuisance, taken on balance."

"Mmmm." Leo put one of the seeds on the floor, stood and put his foot on the seed. He bent to look at the result. "Mmmm," he said again. This time, he raised his foot and stomped it a good one. He winced and drew in his breath. Then he retrieved the seed and gave it a good going over.

"Nope," he said. "Takes more than a stomping on to crack that thing. Obviously it's not the Imbamba kids spreading them."

That reminded me. I didn't want Savitri suffering burnout at all of eleven—and she'd been working her eyeballs out for the past few hours. I went over to her. I waited until she'd finished the plant she was currently loading and then I loomed. "Take a break," I said.

"But, Annie," she said. Sounded just like Elly's kids—and in the same circumstances, too.

"No buts," I said. "I need the computer for a bit. You can have it back after lunch."

Leo caught on instantly. "Savitri? Could you do me a favor and see that Mabob isn't getting into trouble? He's not familiar with farms or cows and there's no telling what he's up to. Especially if he's bored."

"Sure, Leo. Uh, if he's bored, I could play with him."

"That'd help a lot, Savitri. Thanks."

She darted out, pausing only to make sure the door latched behind her.

I jerked a thumbs-up at Leo. "Good move."

"I learned some mothering tricks, too—and not just from Elly. In fact, I may be ahead of you on points."

He wasn't going to get an argument from me on that count. I nodded and settled at the computer to gene-read the cane leaves I'd picked earlier.

Got another surprise out of that. "I lose my bet," I said.

"What?" said Leo. There was more than a little amazement in his tone. A moment later he was looking over my shoulder.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"About the canes," I said. "Have a look at this. I thought we were dealing with a stand of clones—but these are all different plants."

"Why should that be surprising?"

"Because it means they're altruists, which isn't all that common where I come from."

I could see by his expression that he didn't get it. "Look, Leo—one plant catches the critter, holds it till it drops dead. But when it drops, it lands on the etching runners of one of the *other* plants, so that plant gets the benefit, *not* the one that did the actual catching."

"Bet those runners interlace a lot."

"Bet they do too. But it's still odd enough to be surprising." I pushed back from the computer to give him a smile. "That's what I like about this business. You never know when nature's going to do something truly interesting."

The smile back should have gotten an award. "That's what I like about *you*, Annie."

I stood up and we did some variations on that theme, including some on how much I liked him back. After a while, I realized we had an audience. I tapped Leo to let him know and we broke—both of us expecting to find Mabob, I think.

It wasn't. It was Nikolai. Damn if the kid didn't have Leo's ability for quiet appreciation of a scene as well as the other traits I'd already noticed.

Nikolai grinned at both of us. "I came to apologize to Annie."

Leo laid an arm across my shoulders and said, "You didn't tell me Nikolai'd been misbehaving."

"He hasn't," I said. "Unless he knows something I don't."

Nikolai made a wry face. "That's exactly what the apology's for. —Annie, I haven't been relating my fossils to Mirabile's current wildlife. Not sufficiently, at any rate. You didn't think of paleontology, I hear—but I didn't think of contemporary biology, so we're even."

He spread his hands wide and gave me the most engaging grin this side of Leo's. "I spent the morning as instructed: going over my notes to gloss them before I loaded them into ships' files. And I found—well, if you'll let me hunt through the fossil cabinets a minute, I'll show you what I found."

"You're on," I said. So he went rummaging, while I sat on my impatience as hard as I could. Given Leo's example, it was easier to wait—but not much.

By the time Nikolai said, "Ah," I was not just sitting on my impatience, I was bouncing on it. Nikolai carefully hoisted a foot-long chunk of shale from the cabinet and carried it over to the table. With me treading on his heels.

He held the slate to his chest a moment longer. "If I'd been paying attention, Annie, *I* could have told Lalique her Dragon's Teeth were Mirabilan."

With that, he set the slab of rock—carefully—on the tabletop. "This

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is a chunk of shale from the upstream end of the island. You tell me, Annie—is that the same plant as the calf-catching canes or isn't it?"

I'd never had any practical experience at examining fossils but I was willing to give it a go under circumstances like that. What I was looking at was the imprint some plant had made in long-ago mud. Must have been very fine silt, come to think of it. The detail was extremely fine—after I'd gotten the hang of looking sort of sidewise to catch the shadows. I could make out not just the canes themselves, but leaves and even the slightly pressed image of a flower as well.

And short of doing a gene-read on the thing, which I damn well couldn't, I was sure. "Looks the same to me," I said. "Leo?"

Leo'd been doing some sidewise looking of his own. "Dead ringer for the calf-catchers. See here." He pointed at the flower. "The detail's good enough to see the structure of the calyx—that's almost as good as a gene-read."

"So I apologize," said Nikolai. "I promise never to hold out on you again."

"Good," I said. "Now tell me how common they were and when that was."

"*When* is something I can't tell you. I don't have enough information yet—and I haven't been able to convince the factory I've need of a carbon-14 dating machine. But—how common? Annie, there's practically a stall-full of specimens just like it in the barn. We only put the best of them in the cabinets. In the interests of my baby science, we couldn't throw any of them away—"

"Thank god for *that!*" I said.

"I take it that means I get to keep both my ears," Nikolai said.

"Yes," said Leo and I, simultaneously.

Both of Nikolai's hands came up to grab his earlobes—as if to reassure them they weren't to be parted. But he was laughing out loud, now, and so were Leo and I.

"Well," he said, "the cane was as common in that level of shale as Mabob's cousin was. If you like, I can show you every single one of those we've found."

"I like," I said.

"Me, too," said Leo. "Mirabilan wildlife is *still* my province, Annie."

Mabob whistled and rattled happily.

"And just where did *you* come from?" I asked him.

He whistled at me earnestly, for all the world as if he was answering the question. Too bad I don't understand Thinga. Then he swiveled his head to watch Leo, wide-eyed.

Leo was checking the door. "Latched," he reported.

Mabob whistled a few phrases at him, sounding smug.

"Right," I said. "We're going to the barn to look at Nikolai's fossils, Mabob. Want to come?"

Mabob strutted toward Leo, with a quick glance over his shoulder to see if we were following. We did.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I'd heard that door latch when Savitri left the house. Still, maybe she'd tired of playing with him and let him in before she went elsewhere.

Between the canes and Mabob—not forgetting Leo—life was getting damn interesting around the Imbamba place.

Looking at fossils gets easier with practice—and we got a lot of practice that afternoon. Nikolai hadn't been exaggerating one whit when he'd said a "stall-full" of them. And the most interesting thing of all was that Mabob's cousin kept showing up in the same geologic period as the canes. (So did the fuzzwillies; made my theory look better all the time.)

From the looks of it, cousin had the same eating habits as Mabob—if it moves, eat it; if it doesn't, eat it faster. Any fossil that gave us a bit of cousin's stomach area gave us the bones of small creatures of every description.

A lot of them I'd never seen live. When I said as much to Nikolai, he whipped out a pad and started taking notes and asking a stream of questions that would have put Elly's youngest in second place.

The ones I could answer, I did. The ones Leo could answer, *he* did. The ones neither of us could answer, well—"That's your bailiwick, Nikolai. You're the paleontologist. You tell me!"

I don't think I've seen anybody that excited since Leo took up reading genes. Nothing like enthusiasm to brighten your day.

Unless it's just plain good luck. . . .

"Here, Annie," Nikolai said, shoving yet another chunk of shale at me. "Tell me what you make of this one. It looks like it's been eating peas. Or maybe eyeballs."

"Pretty solid eyeballs to have lasted all this time," I said.

But the stomach was full to the brim with round objects. If I hadn't held them in my hand a few hours earlier, it never would have occurred to me. I stared at the fossil—there were enough scales and enough to the ribcage to tell me beyond doubt that here was Mabob's cousin again, with a stomach full of what looked for all the world like cane seeds.

"Sacrifice one of the eyeballs for science?" I asked Nikolai.

He hesitated a moment, looked down as if counting the number of "eyeballs" and nodded.

I shoved the chunk of shale into his lap, got up and went to the next stall over, where Lalique was feeding the bison calf. "Two questions," I said. "Have you got a microlaser—and who's got the finest hand at operating it?"

Luck was with me. She nodded. "Orlando," she said. Saved me the trouble and impatience of having somebody from the lab fly one in.

"Where's he?" I said. And when she told me, I said, "*Three* questions. Third one: do you have to weed canes out of the vegetable garden?"

"God, yes, Annie, hundreds of them. How did you know?"

"Paleontology," I said.

As soon as Orlando could be spared from farm chores, I put him to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

task of slicing open one of the cane seed samples and one of Nikolai's fossil eyeballs. "I don't know how much fine structure the fossil retains, Orlando, but do your best."

I guess some of my excitement had rubbed off. "You bet!" he said, with real enthusiasm for the job. You'd never know the man had had maybe twelve hours sleep in the last two weeks—and only eight of it the night before.

"You think those are fossil cane seeds, don't you, Annie," Nikolai said. Except for the twinkle, it would have been an accusation.

"Bet money on it," I said. "Orlando, you folks still use slurry for cooking gas?"

Orlando gave me an absent "Sure," without looking up. That's how absorbed he'd gotten in his fossil botanizing.

"Right." I headed for the door. Didn't realize till I was already out and around the house that both Leo and Mabob were right behind me.

Wondered why Nikolai was missing, but it only took a bit of thought to figure that one out—he'd stayed behind to protect his fossils from Orlando's zeal.

The methane slurry was right where I'd remembered it. I lifted off the lid, reeled a bit from the smell, then rolled up my sleeves and dipped in.

Before I knew it, Leo had *his* sleeves rolled up too—and was up to his elbows same as me. "Might help," he said, trying to talk without inhaling, "if you'd tell me what I'm fishing for."

"Round hard objects," I said, trying to do the same. It didn't work but that didn't matter—my hands had found exactly what I'd expected them to. I breathed in happily, not caring a bit about the stench I got with the breath.

"Got some," I said. I came up with a handful, in fact—all just the right size and shape.

Leo brought up a handful more and between the two of us we got the lid back on the slurry.

"Right," I said, grinning and dripping.

"Right," said Leo.

"Gronk!" said Mabob—reacting either to our triumph or to the partial relief from the smell.

We headed back to the house at a quick trot. I wouldn't know for sure until I'd rinsed off the seeds for a closer look.

When we got to the door, I realized neither of us had a hand clean or free to open it. The two of us stopped, looked at each other and sighed in unison. The pause was just long enough for Mabob to reach the door ahead of us.

He cocked an eye first at Leo, then at me. Then—whistling cheerily—he caught the door handle with his beak, twisted it open and stood there holding the door for us.

"That answers that question," I said. And I stepped through, followed by Leo, followed by Mabob.

Lousy lack of manners, I realized. Stopped and turned back—just in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

time to see Mabob catch the inside handle and pull the door to until it latched. Then he let go and whistled brightly at me.

"Thanks, Mabob," I said. "Leo?"

"I saw," he said, very quietly.

Mabob whistled another few bars and set to preening his scales, while Leo and I looked at each other.

Nikolai broke the spell, bounding across the room to demand, "Where've you been—?" He recoiled from our combined smell in almost comic fashion.

I'd forgotten we were both still dripping. "Up to our elbows in cowshit, if you really must know," I said. "How about turning on some water for us so we can get cleaned up?"

"Maybe we should ask Mabob," Leo suggested. "A handle is a handle."

"Better make sure he knows how to turn that off," I growled. "Otherwise you'll have water running forever."

Having missed what had gone before, Nikolai ignored that and led us in to wash up. The washing up made the seeds look all the more like cane seeds.

Except for one thing, which Leo had already thought of. He put one of the seeds he'd retrieved from the slurry on the floor and put his foot on top of it. He didn't step hard, either—but the shell gave way with a crackle.

"Dragon's Teeth," he said, smiling. "From cows."

"But hardly from their genes," I said. Then I got another thought. "One thing I do want to know—Nikolai, can you spare one or two of the sample cane seeds that still have the dried fruit pulp surrounding them?"

"Living samples are Orlando's department," he said. Which was perfectly true, so we all trooped back into the common room to make the same request of Orlando.

"Yes," said Orlando, before I could even open my mouth. "The fossil seeds and the cane seeds are identical, as far as I can tell. See for yourself: the structure of the—"

"I'll take your word for it," I said. "Spare me one or two of the newer ones, with pulp still attached?"

Orlando gave me a long look, then cast about the tabletop and scooped up a couple of uncut cane seeds and poured them into my outstretched hand.

"Here, Mabob," I said. "Hungry? Want a snack?" I held them out to him.

Delicately—I say that because unless you see it done, you wouldn't believe that beak could do anything delicately—Mabob dipped into my palm and picked up a cane seed. Touched his tongue to it. Looked thoughtful.

Then, using only beak tips and tongue (and the tongue *had* to be prehensile!), he peeled the dried fruit from the seed and swallowed it. A quick check of the tongue—to make sure he'd gotten all the good

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stuff—and then he laid the cleaned seed back into my palm and rattled happily as he took a second.

"Won't eat eyeballs," I said. "Poor fuzzwillies." I dropped the cleaned seeds back on the table and rounded on Nikolai. "Given a choice," I said, "would you rather go on scouting new territory or be a paleontologist full-time?"

If Nikolai had had orange irises, he'd have given me as good an eye-blaze as ever Mabob had—and his jaw dropped open as well.

When he got it together what came out was: "That's easy, Annie—I'd rather spend all my time with the fossils but . . ."

"But me no buts." I grinned. "Orlando, I can tell you where those canes are coming from—and after I've done that, I'm going to call Sabah and tell him why we need a full-time paleontologist on the team."

"Not without Lalique," said Orlando. "Wait right here. I'll get her."

I was laughing by then. I couldn't help myself. "I promise not to say a word until Lalique gets here." As he charged for the door, I shouted after him, "But hurry! I don't know how long a wait Nikolai can survive!"

It wasn't just Lalique that Orlando rounded up, but every free hand on the place. They crowded around, milling and muttering and generally working Mabob up into a state of such excitement that he forgot himself and gronked. . . .

After which he tried to make himself invisible, which wasn't easy, given that the background wasn't the right color for vanishing into. "It's all right, Mabob," I said, and reached over to rub his head. "You forgot, that's all. These guys aren't being particularly quiet either."

Reassured, he whistled at me very quietly.

The door slammed. A minute later Orlando thrust Lalique into the middle of the crowd. "Okay, Annie," he said. "*Now* tell us the story."

I can resist anything except temptation. "Once upon a time," I began. There was a shout of laughter from Leo; Mabob caught the spirit of the thing and whistled cheerfully. "Settle down," I told them, "or you don't get your milk and cookies."

Nikolai swelled to about twice his size and looked about to explode with anticipation, so I went on. "Once upon a paleozoic time—or whatever the Mirabilan equivalent would be—there were fly-catching canes all over Mirabile. There were so many of them in fact that the fuzzwillies *always* lived in canebrakes—it was good protection from some of their predators. They had to do a little adapting for the occasion but you can still see the adaptation in the thickness of a fuzzwilly eggshell."

I gave the floor to Leo and let him explain about the fuzzwillies to everybody who hadn't heard that part of the story.

Then I took up again. "At that same paleozoic time, Mabob's cousins flocked all over Mirabile. They had a taste for cane seeds and ate 'em by the stomach-full. Now, remember, this is how seeds get dispersed. Mabob's cousin likes the flavor of the fruit and swallows it seed and all. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fruit is digested and the seed comes out the other end, ready to sprout where it falls."

"Alimentary, my dear Annie," said somebody from the crowd, drawing an impressive series of groans and hisses. Mabob looked at me with alarm.

I rubbed his head. "Dunno if I can explain that to you, kiddo, but it's nothing to worry about. Okay?"

He whistled me a few notes and relaxed.

"Now," I said, regaining the floor, "what happened to Mabob's cousins, I can't tell you. Maybe the bad puns killed 'em all off. At any rate, they vanished. Problem was, just as the fuzzwillies had adapted to life in the canes, the canes had adapted to Mabob's cousins—and in much the same way."

I held out the cut cane seed I'd picked up from the table. "The cane seed's so thick the sprout can't make it through the outer shell without help."

Savitri took the seed from my hand to peer at it, nod, and pass it around for the rest to see. "What kind of help, Annie?" she said.

"Well, there was no problem if the seed fell in the canebrake because the canes would etch through it—the way they do the fuzzwillies' eggs. But to spread the seeds the canes needed Mabob's cousins. My guess is they had the right kind of stomach acid to soften the outer shells without digesting them all the way."

Nikolai said, "But when Mabob's cousins died out, the canes could no longer spread!"

"And the fuzzwillies had to learn a new way to hatch *their* eggs," said Lalique. "Oh, my aching hand!"

"Exactly," I said. "Mabob eats the fruit but spits out the seeds, so he's no help. Eventually there wouldn't have been any canes anywhere—they'd have gone the way of Mabob's cousins."

I waited, fully expecting a eureka. When I didn't get one, I said, "What—nobody's got it yet?" I looked at Savitri and said, "How about if I tell you your mom was right: the cows are responsible for the canes. . . ."

That got me the eureka.

Savitri's eyes popped. "The *cows* are eating the fruit, seeds and all! And their stomach acid is strong enough to help the seeds sprout!"

I handed her one of the seeds Leo and I'd fished from the slurry. "Found this in a cow pie," I told her. "Give it a squeeze and see what happens."

It took her more than a squeeze—I'd misjudged the strength in her small hands—but once she put it between the heels of her hands and pressed hard, she got a very satisfying *pop!*

"The cows," said Nikolai, and his face wrinkled up all over with a smile that matched Leo's to the last laugh line. "The cows are filling an ecological niche that's been empty since Mabob's cousins died off."

Not having a medal, I pinned a finger on his chest instead. "You got

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it. *Now* I'm going to call Sabah and tell him why we need a jason who can't do a gene-read on his specimens."

Nikolai gave me a puzzled look.

"You don't *want* to be a full-time paleontologist?"

He jerked back. "Sure I do, Annie! —But there's still something I don't understand. It's a hell of a long time between the last of Mabob's cousins and the first of the cows. So where did the first cane plant come from?"

"Oh, that. Seeds can germinate after hundreds of years; check ships' files and you'll find instances of seeds found in archeological digs that sprouted. I imagine the first cane seed was here on Haffenhaff all along. Eventually, the seed simply *eroded* enough to sprout."

"So the occasional cane seed would have sprouted all along," Nikolai said. "Not enough to flourish but enough to keep the species from total extinction."

"If you've got a better theory, I want to hear it," I said.

He grinned and shook his head.

"Well, work on it," I told him. "I'm looking forward to hearing all about Mabob's cousins. I suspect they're not just Mirabile's idea of a Guernsey." Mabob, hearing his name, whistled agreement.

"Wait, Annie," said Lalique. "That means wherever there are cows there'll be canes."

"Yup. And wherever there are canes, the fuzzwillies won't drop eggs on your head. *You* decide if you want to root 'em out."

We left her looking at a crooked finger. Didn't have to ask again—I knew which way *she'd* decide.

Leo, as always, was as good as his word. Once we got back to the lab, he even shared the dandelion gene-reads. Didn't let Mike off the hook either. While Mabob strutted around town whistling his adventures to anybody he met, the rest of us grubbed our way through some four hundred more dandelions.

"Enough is enough," I said at last. Pushed back my chair, stood. It took me a full minute to stretch the kinks out of my back. "What have you got, Mike?"

He leaned back and glowered at the screen. "Lettuce, endive, chicory, sunflowers, artichokes—"

"Any bugs?"

"No bugs in this batch. That doesn't mean the next batch won't seed bugs, Annie."

"Leo?"

"No bugs. I've got the showy stuff over here—asters, dahlias, marigolds, chrysanthemums." He grinned. "A whole flower garden full!"

Had to smile at that. "Mine too. So I say we're done for the year—at least, as far as the dandelions are concerned."

Mike frowned at me. Should've known, for all his bitching, that he'd be the one to hang on longest. The younger ones will always risk burnout.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But it was a different kind of burnout that worried him. "Annie, the folks in town are likely to torch them all if we don't certify them safe."

"I'm ahead of you on that one." I turned to the computer and called up the file I'd been holding in reserve since the dandelions had first popped up. "Have a look at that."

He and Leo both did. "Dandelion wine? You can make wine out of dandelions?"

"So it says in ships' files. I found a dozen different recipes—all of which say the primary ingredient is dandelion *flowers*. So the ones we've checked, they leave strictly alone. The rest are free for the picking—and the fermenting."

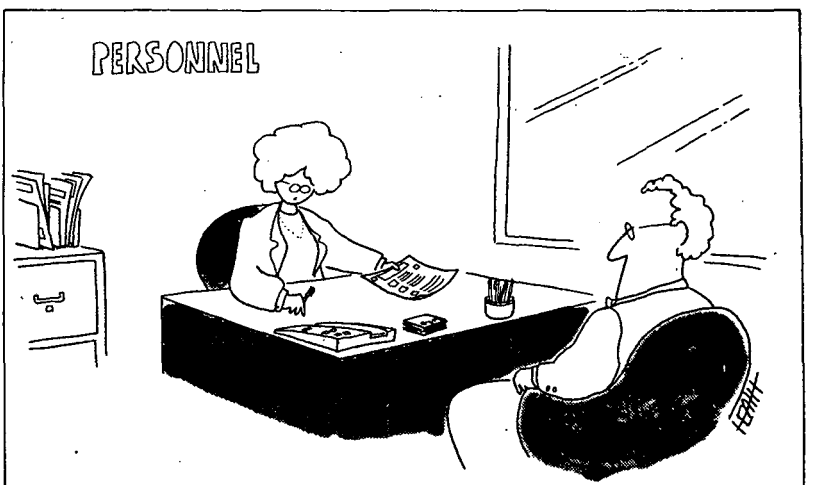
Mike considered the screen. "I think it'll work, Annie. I think you're right."

"Then I leave the arrangements to you, Mike." I took Leo's hand. "Come on, Leo—you and I are gonna go out and join Mabob. I could do with a good gronk."

Surprised the hell out of Mabob, but the rest of the folks in town scarcely noticed. By then, they were too busy harvesting dandelions to pay us any mind.

"Gonna be one helluva year for dandelion red," I told Mabob.

"GRONK!" he agreed. ●



It's pretty much the standard form, Mr. Knowles. Name, address, employment history, and a five-hundred-word essay on how that employment history might have changed, had the Roman emperor, Constantinus, failed to adopt Christianity . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

The Power of 3

Black Trillium

By Marion Zimmer Bradley, Julian May, & Andre Norton

Doubleday, $18.95

Formidable is the only word for the combo of authors (Marion Zimmer Bradley, Julian May, & Andre Norton) on *Black Trillium*. These three ladies have accounted for some of the most popular SF and fantasy of the past several decades; their collaboration on a novel smacks of a stunt rather than a serious attempt to create a great work of genre literature, but there is no way that those who know their stories can fail to be intrigued as to what the results might be.

The novel takes place in a fantasy world on which one is given plenty of initial background that has very much the quality of fairy-tale. Ruwenda is a country on "the Peninsula," with a handsome king and a beautiful queen ruling a population consisting not only of humans but of "Oddlings," non-human races with various magical powers. These "Oddlings" or "Folk," as they are alternately referred to, are regarded by some humans as animals and by others as aborigines; they range from the Ewokian Uisgu to the skeletal, man-eating Skritek. Ruwenda has been protected from its greedy neighbor Labornok over the years not only by the intervening mountains and its own swampy nature (the majority of the country is called "the Mazy Mire"), but by the Archimage, a magical sort of lady who lives deep in the outback and who *has* lived apparently for centuries. There's also the fact that Ruwenda is chockful of ruins of cities made by "the Vanished Ones," which had apparently been built on the islands (now hills) that dotted the lake (now swamp) that has become the Mazy Mire. The Oddlings are continually finding strange and mysterious artifacts that are regarded as magic, but which have a suspicious air of technology about them. (All three of the authors, of course, are noted for their fantasy *and* their SF, and in two cases particularly, for amazingly adept combinations of the genres, always tricky to bring off. So one might expect, even in this Bros. Grimm background, a touch of the tech. The villainous sorcerer, for instance, uses a not-very-dependable "scrying mirror" and when its farseen images appear, he thanks the "Dark Powers," whom he names as Aysee Lyne, Inturnal Bataree, and Bahkup.)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ruwenda has been so well protected that everybody has gotten a bit soft, and even when the queen gives birth to girl triplets with the aid of the archimage, who predicts that they have a fearsome destiny and terrible tasks awaiting them, nobody really expects trouble. But a wicked sorcerer gains influence in neighboring Labornok, and is able to counter the failing powers of the archimage successfully enough to invade and conquer Ruwenda, killing the king and queen in the process. The seventeen-year-old princesses escape, and become separated (each with an Oddling companion); naturally enough, the story is of how they win back the kingdom and learn to be other than spoiled princesses in the process (the first-born is cold and intellectual, the second is violence prone, and the youngest is an airhead).

Do too many cooks spoil this broth? Yes and no. As you can gather from the above, there's a lot of interesting detail in the intricately woven background, and you're very aware of more than one fertile imagination at work. There is a variable quality to the writing certainly (it tends to range from the intricately cute to the absolutely straightforward), but that's not all that bothersome. Trouble is that everybody's invention seems to flag about two-thirds of the way through the story and the reader begins to weary of yet another princess slogging through the jungle/swamp/snow drifts (no deserts in Ruwenda), zapping various menaces with one of the various talismans they've been sent to seek out.

Devoted aficionados of each of the writers will have fun trying to guess who wrote what. The logical assumption, of course, is that each writer was responsible for one princess, though this is by no means a sure thing due to the intricate nature of the story. This humble reviewer is not about to make any judgments whatsoever as to who did what. There's always the memory of that shepherd named Paris who was confronted with a trio of fearsomely talented females.

Entertaining

Polar City Blues

By Katharine Kerr

Bantam, $4.50 (paper)

Katharine Kerr has subtitled her *Polar City Blues* "An Entertainment," which is perhaps a little negatively misleading. I found it entertaining, Lord knows, but the subtitle implies a certain frivolity below the level of a novel this well thought out and this well constructed.

As a matter of fact, I was entertained from the very first paragraph, which is describing a sunset on an alien planet, with colors that are first described as "insultingly gaudy," which then fade into "an offensive little girl pink." This planet is Hagar, which is part of the small (seven inhabited planets in four systems, two asteroid belts and a couple of minable moons), human-dominated group of worlds

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

called the Republic, which is hemmed in by the larger interstellar Confederation and the Coreward Alliance, both dominated by alien races.

The story begins with the murder of an alien diplomat from the Coreward Alliance, found with his throat slashed in the middle of a holographic public fountain (Hagar is a very dry world). This untidy event sets off a domino effect of events which involves not only the police and diplomatic establishment of Hagar, but in the best tradition of murder and intrigue stories, makes waves in Hagar's extensive human underworld.

This is because the series of murders that follows is very likely to bring down the wrath of the establishment onto Porttown (yes, there's a good old fashioned disreputable spaceport), and the local powers that be want to find the perp, particularly as the victims are Porttown denizens (possibly witnesses to the initial crime).

Now all this sounds like pretty standard fare, but Kerr's handling of it all is little short of exquisite. For one thing, the whole thing begins to mushroom and not just into an interstellar diplomatic incident. One of the murders seems to be that of a member of a totally unknown alien race, and there's also the exotic and nameless plague that begins to show up. For another, Kerr has a wonderful cast of human and nonhuman characters—the aliens are a diverse and diverting lot, and several of the humans are psychics, a telepathic strain that showed up just before humanity made First Contact and went to the stars with secondhand knowledge. Human psychics are not tolerated in the alien confederations, and are regulated and tattooed in the human republic. There's fear in the human underworld that the killer is actually a psychic assassin acting for one of the alien governments, which would open a big can of worms. There are also some engaging ordinary humans, and one of the best smartass, computer AI's just awakening to humanlike sentience I've come across.

In short, Kerr has taken some not-unusual elements and handled them with amazing dexterity, and I mean dexterity in the sense of a juggling act. Her multi-alien, star-traveling background culture is believable and intriguingly complex, and is actually made comprehensible without smothering the action with exposition. The murder mystery intrigue moves right along, maintaining your interest and your sympathies with the various officials and low-lifes involved. The characters, particularly the aforementioned AI and a mismatched pair of lovers that can't quite come to grips with their feelings, are engaging. And, more subtly, Kerr displays a sophistication (sexual, cultural, and otherwise) rare in SF—the reader is not inundated with exotic sexuality or esoteric cultural references, but there are

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

enough of both to ice the cake of the narrative, as it were.

One can hardly say this is a perfect novel—in the sense of an enduring classic, at least—but one *can* say that the author's mixture of elements is almost flawless. If one has to pick nits, it's that all this is perhaps a little wasted on what is essentially a murder mystery cum intrigue. But we're back to the beginning—the author did tell us it was "an entertainment."

Dr. Norton & Mr. Bloch

The Jekyll Legacy

By Robert Bloch and Andre Norton
Tor, $17.95

It's generally conceded that *Frankenstein* is the first major work of science fiction, though there are certainly worthy earlier works that could claim the crown. But Ms. Shelley's use of scientific extrapolation as the basis of a story that was a morality tale and a cracking good yarn certainly give it the edge in the general scheme of things.

But what might be called the *second* major work of science fiction? Much depends, of course, on the interpretation of the word *major*, but probably the best-known work to follow Shelley's in the nineteenth century was Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (published in 1886), again a cautionary tale about the uses of science and scientific research. It has indeed lasted as a minor classic; also like *Frankenstein*, it has entered modern mythology with several film adaptations of varying quality. (If you must know, I prefer the Fredric March version because of the raw nastiness of the relationship between Hyde and the tart.)

One of the stranger variations of the theme was a movie called *Altered States*, an update of the theme which involved two filmmakers (Paddy Chayevsky and Ken Russell) so divergent in their respective talents that it was commonly commented that the film was *made* by Jekyll and Hyde. I mention this because we now have a literary sequel by two talents so diverse that the same might be said in this case. Robert Bloch (*Psycho* et al) and Andre (*Witch World*) Norton.

The results are at least a cut above the usual movie sequel script. The events take place about a year after the J&H affair. Some old acquaintances appear—Poole the butler is tracked down for information by Inspector Newcomen, who is not about to give up on Dr. Jekyll's disappearance; Hyde is, of course, accounted for by his suicide in Jekyll's lab. But Poole is murdered, and Mrs. Poole (Jekyll's ex-housemaid) insists that it was done by a dwarfish creature that looked like a fiend.

Add to this Hester Lane, newly arrived in London from Canada, an impoverished gentlewoman who suspects her British father's name might have been Jekyll, and through a mysterious newspaper advertisement contacts a Mr. Utterson, whom we remember as Jekyll's attorney. It seems that Hester

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is Jekyll's niece. She inherits the house, and hears the true story of what happens from Utterson, just before *he* is battered to death on his own doorstep.

The big question of the novel, of course, is *who* is following in Jekyll's footsteps (or could it even be Hyde, back from the dead?). The authors lead the reader on a merry chase, involving, among other matters, the very beginnings of the Salvation Army, of all things, in the nastier slums of London (which are evoked in all their squalor). The denouement may be a bit of a comedown—the whole thing resolves a little too speedily—but it all makes for atmospheric fun and a neat spinoff on a classic tale.

Hydebound

Mary Reilly
By Valerie Martin
Doubleday, $18.95

Given the previous entry, I can't resist bringing up yet another novel on the Jekyll and Hyde theme, published just a bit earlier. Are J&H suddenly in? Not that they've ever been out, of course. As noted above, while not achieving the fame of a Frankenstein or a Dracula, Jekyll and Hyde have definitely entered the mythology of our culture. (And not just as legendary figures, but, again like Shelley's creation, metaphoric ones—"He was a real Jekyll and Hyde" is as meaningful as "He's created a Frankenstein's monster," even to those who have never read the novels.)

Like another Jekyll and Hyde pair, Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* is a very different kettle of fish from the Norton/Bloch spinoff. It, too, is directly rooted in Stevenson, but rather than telling of what happened *after* the events of the original novel, it chronicles the original novel's very events from an obliquely angled point of view. Mary Reilly is the underhousemaid of the Jekyll household (which has a staff of six). Unusually for a female servant of the Victorian age, she is literate and keeps a journal (which is the substance of the novel); she is also perceptive and, one gathers from remarks by others, an attractive young woman.

She worships her employer, the scholarly Dr. Jekyll; her immediate superior, the butler Poole (see above) has suspicions that her feelings, if not her thoughts or actions, may rise above her station. Her journal chronicles, very slowly, the disruption of life in the household as Jekyll's actions become more and more odd. But the first part of the story does have more of the flavor of "Upstairs, Downstairs" than of Robert Louis Stevenson; it's as if a good deal of time were spent on Rose wondering why Captain James is behaving in this peculiar manner.

There are hints of horrors to come when Mary is sent on errands to a house in an appalling section of London—but only hints—but when Jekyll gives the run of the household to his young "protégé," Edward Hyde, things pick up a bit. Mary has several encounters with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this monstrous individual, but again, they are remarkably low-keyed. When the horrendous end comes to Jekyll, it's a bit different from Stevenson's version, with Mary playing a rather macabre part.

One is a bit baffled as to why this variation-on-a-theme novel was written, and why there has been such interest in it (major movie possibilities, etc.). Essentially it's a neatly done character study of a Victorian housemaid in love with her employer, who is engaged in some fairly mysterious goings on. *Or* it can be viewed as a sort of downbeat interlinear to the Stevenson novel, in which case it's something like a water color version of a Van Gogh canvas.

Cop Show

Hawk & Fisher
By Simon Green
Ace, $3.95 (paper)

Hawk and Fisher are cops . . .

"[Hawk] turned the handle, eased the door open an inch, and then kicked it in. He leapt into the room and glared quickly about him, his axe poised and ready."

Axe?

Yes, axe. Hawk and Fisher happen to be cops—or more correctly, guards—in the city of Haven, a largish seaport in what seems to be a fairly standard magic kingdom rife with sorcerers, magic, and whatall. Hawk and Fisher also happen to be male and female, respectively, and married.

Hawk and Fisher by Simon Green is obviously the first in a series about these two, and while the ingredients are anything but original, I think what charmed me about it is the absolutely unabashed manner in which Green has copied the style of almost any current cop/detective/sleuth TV show—I kept seeing Hawk as a slightly aging Ken Wahl, and the situations and dialogue are straight off your current screen. ("We've been on some dirty jobs in the past, Hawk, but this has got to be the dirtiest," says Fisher, as they open the lid of a vampire's coffin.)

For instance, the two have been assigned as guards to a posh dinner party at which will be present one of the more powerful politicians of Haven, whose life is on the line until a certain bit of legislation is passed. (But the party is thrown by one of the more powerful wizards of the community.) At one point, Hawk says, "I don't like coming onto a case unprepared. We don't know enough about what's going on here, and we certainly don't know enough about the people involved. Katherine Blackstone is acting out of character. Visage knows why, but won't tell us. Instead, she tells us that Councillor Blackstone is in danger, in one of the best defended houses in the city. Blackstone's political adviser warns us about Blackstone's right-hand man, who turns out to be very friendly with the Councillor's wife." Sound familiar? But Visage is a witch, and by best-defended, Hawk means from spells. The Councillor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is indeed murdered (in a locked room), and the host puts down an isolation spell, which keeps everyone in the house from leaving for eight hours (but traps them inside with the murderer).

Green makes this peculiar combination of classic fantasy and modern tube script work; it's good fun, and ideal light reading.

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Seventh Annual Collection* edited by Gardner Dozois (St. Martin's Press, $24.95, hardcover, $14.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1499 Boul. de Maisonneuve Est, Montreal, Quebec H2L 2B2, Canada. ●

LOVE POEM FROM A WIZARD

The dark of moth inside the porchlight lens
is dead, scorched, hollow, gone. Only ashes
to mark a moth are left. Edges remain.
You cannot look long before the brightness pools
upon your corneas and floats away
all specks and blurred shadows. You squeeze the light
out with tightened lids, leaving empty eyes
and nothing but a slight sting, nothing—no moths.

I could kindle letters with a jet
of brain-flame and burn this paper black.
I could. I could give you the gray ashes
to crush and mix with the oil in your palm
to mark your face, to say, "I was once written."
My love burns, but burns up writing paper.

Instead, I give you moths, furry and brown,
fluttering after pheremones at night.
I send moths through darkness to bump into
your face, to caress you with feathery antennae—
moths filled inside with moth-juice and desire,
live flocks of moths to fill the air about you,
to take *your* shape, to hold you quietly
within the cool beating of many wings.

—Tony Daniel

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Classified Marketplace

ISAAC ASIMOV/ANALOG combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $6.50 per word—payable in advance—($97.50 minimum). Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager, DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

ART

FANTASTYC SCENES. Five different limited edition fantasy art prints, signed and numbered by the artist. $25.00. P.O. Box 64134, 5512 4th St. NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2K 6J1.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box AA-54, Neche, ND 58265.

Bargain Books

Publishers' overstocks, remainders, imports—over 3,000 titles at up to 80% savings in our **FREE CATALOG!** Biography, History, Art, Nature, Gardening, Cooking, Fiction—something for everyone, including about 600 new titles monthly. Write: **Hamilton** Box 15-714, Falls Village CT 06031

FREE CATALOGS of Science Fiction pulps, digests, paperbacks, hardcovers. Collections also purchased. Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, IN 46032.

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK! Join our successful authors. All subjects invited. Publicity, advertising, beautiful books. Send for fact-filled booklet and free manuscript report. Carlton Press, Dept. SMO, 11 West 32 Street, New York 10001.

DO You Write? Publisher seeks manuscripts, all types/subjects. Free manuscript examination/brochure. 1-800-695-9599.

FREE LIST! Used Mystery, detective, thriller fiction. Marshall Snow, 292 Providence Rd., So. Grafton, MA 01560.

SONGWRITERS

POEMS WANTED. Songs recorded and published. Radio-TV promotions. Broadway Music Prod., Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 33578.

TAPES & CASSETTES

OLDTIME RADIO PROGRAMS. Great Science Fiction! Also, mysteries, comedies, westerns. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Heritage Farm, New Freedom, Pennsylvania 17349.

In The Future . . .

YOUR

Classified/Display

AD CAN BE PLACED HERE

For details:
SF CLASSIFIED
380 Lexington Ave.
New York, NY 10017
(212) 856-6338

YOU'LL MAKE MONEY

SAVE MONEY TOO— BY READING and ANSWERING THESE CLASSIFIED ADS

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Con(vention) activity moves down the East Coast with the approach of spring. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE (say what it's for). For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.

FEBRUARY 1991

8-10—**PsurrealCon.** For info, write: **OK Mem. Union #215A, Norman OK 73019.** Or call **(703) 273-3297** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Norman OK (if city omitted, same as in address), at the Sheraton. Guests include: M. Lackey, D.L. Anderson, Mark Rogers, K. Berdak, Donna MacKenzie.

15-17—**LuCon. (0532) 742622.** At the University Union, Leeds UK. Colin Greenland. Third annual.

15-17—**Boskone. (617) 625-2311.** Marriott & Sheraton Springfield MA. Resnick, Emsh, B. Thomsen.

15-17—**CostumeCon.** Columbia (MD) Inn, near Baltimore. Costumers' big annual bash. Masquerades.

16—**Ulouni ve Slanem, %Ladislav Peska, Na dolikach 503, Slany 274 01, Czechoslovakia.** SF day.

22-24—**ConCave, Box 24, Franklin TN 42135. (502) 586-3366.** Park Mammoth Resort, Park City KY.

22-24—**Reconnaissance, 5 St. Andrew's Rd., Carshalton, Surrey SM5 2DY, UK.** New Work/Ideas in SF.

28-Mar. 3—**World Horror Con, Box 22817, Nashville TN 37202. (615) 226-6172.** C. Yarbro, Bauman.

MARCH 1991

1-3—**ConSonance, %Box 29888, Oakland CA 94604.** Gytha North, Rilla Heslin. An SF folksinging con.

2—**AprilCon, 313 Ferris Booth, New York NY 10027. (212) 632-1625.** At Columbia U. Ferris Booth Hall.

7-10—**ConTact, %CASFS, Box 11743, Phoenix AZ 85061.** Symposium on Anthropology & SF.

8-10—**LunaCon, Box 338, New York NY 10150.** D. Brin, F. Kelly-Freas, the Ballantines, Hal Clement.

15-17—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. (601) 762-1309.** Weiss, Caldwell. Year of the Dragon.

20-24—**ICFA, Col. of Humanities, Fla. Atlant. U., Boca Raton FL 33431. (717) 532-1495.** Academic.

21-24—**AggieCon, Box J-1, MSC, College Station TX 77844. (409)845-1515.** Over 3000 are expected.

22-24—**MillenniCon, Box 636, Dayton OH 45405.** C. J. Cherryh, Joe Patrouch, Dr. Bill Breuer.

28-31—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 248-2010.** Usually 100+ pros (writers, etc.)

29-31—**Balticon, Box 696, Baltimore MD 21203.** Nancy Kress. At the Marriott Hunt Valley (MD) Inn.

AUGUST 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $110 to 3/31/91.

SEPTEMBER 1991

3-8—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The '92 World SF Con. $75 to 3/31/91.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

4762 $8.98x

SPEND THIS SEASON CRUISING THROUGH OUR GALAXY...

SEE BACK COVER FOR 22 MORE BOOKS!

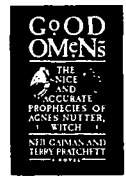
0059 $16.95/$7.98

1842 *Dawn, Adulthood Rites, Imago* $52.85/$12.98

4863* *Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion* $38.90*/$13.98

0091 *The Vor Game, Borders of Infinity* $9.98x

0174 *Magic's Pawn, Magic's Promise, Magic's Price* $14.98x



0216 $18.95/$5.98

4754 $9.98x

START WITH 5 BOOKS FOR $1 with membership

HERE'S WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU JOIN...

5 BOOKS FOR $1. Send no money now. You'll be billed $1, plus shipping and handling, when your membership is accepted.

A GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION. If you're not 100% satisfied with your books, return them within 10 days *at our expense.* Membership will be canceled and you'll owe nothing.

THE FREE CLUB MAGAZINE. You'll receive 14 issues of *Things to Come* a year. Each issue includes 2 Featured Selections plus a number of Alternates from the Club's library of hundreds of books. Twice a year, you may also receive offers of Special Selections.

SHOPPING MADE SIMPLE. To get the Featured Selections, *do nothing*—they'll be sent automatically. If you prefer another book—or none at all—simply return your Member Reply Form by the date shown. A shipping and handling charge is added to each order.

AN EASY-TO-MEET OBLIGATION. Take up to 1 year to buy 4 more books at regular low Club prices. Afterwards, you may resign membership anytime. Or you may continue to enjoy the benefits of belonging to *The Science Fiction Book Club.*

HUGE DISCOUNTS... as much as 65% off publishers' hardcover editions. Club books are sometimes altered in size to fit special presses. All are printed on high-quality, acid-free paper.

RISK-FREE RETURN PRIVILEGES. If you get an unwanted book because your Club magazine came late and you had less than 10 days to decide, return the book *at our expense.*

THE Science Fiction BOOK CLUB®

Reading That's Worlds Apart

MAIL TO: *The Science Fiction Book Club*
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6367
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6367

Please write book numbers here:

17507 38

YES! Please enroll me in *The Science Fiction Book Club* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 5 BOOKS I've indicated. Bill me just $1, plus shipping and handling.

Mr./Mrs.
Miss/Ms. _____
please print

Address _____ Apt. _____

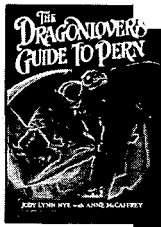
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

If you're under 18, your parent must sign here _____

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

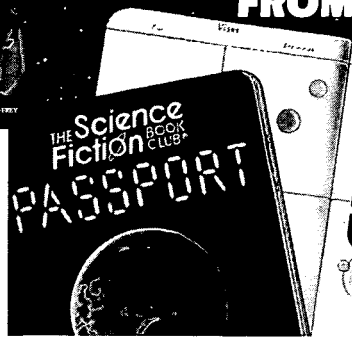
ASI 3/91

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

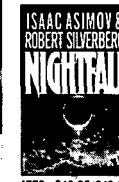


3947 $19.95/$10.98

30 EXOTIC TRIPS™ TO HELP YOU GET AWAY FROM IT ALL...



BOOK ANY 5 FOR $1 WITH MEMBERSHIP



4770 $19.95/$10.98

0125 $19.95/$6.98

6643 $19.95/$5.98

6676 $19.95/$9.98

0364 $19.95/$9.98

0133 $19.95/$9.98

5371 $14.98x

6650 $18.95/$9.98

0117 $21.95/$10.98

5413 $7.98x

0034 $6.98x

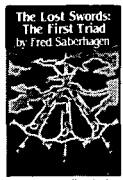
0208+ $18.95/$8.98

6684 $5.98x

0067 $19.95/$11.98

4655 $18.95/$8.98

1420 The First, Second and Third Books
$9.98x



7260 *Woundhealer's Story, Sightblinder's Story, Stonecutter's Story*
$45.85●/$8.98

2303* *The Heir Apparent, The Warrior Lives*
$6.98x

0752 *Elric of Melniboné, The Sailor on the Seas of Fate, The Weird of the White Wolf*
$6.98x

1172 *The Vanishing Tower, The Bane of the Black Sword, Stormbringer*
$8.98x

4424 *Swords Against Wizardry, The Swords of Lankhmar, Swords and Ice Magic*
$12.98x

* Explicit scenes and/or language.
● Combined publishers' editions.
x Hardcover edition exclusively for Club members.

+ Copyright © 1990 Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.

THE Science Fiction BOOK CLUB®
Reading That's Worlds Apart

Prices in fine print are publishers' hardcover editions.
Prices in bold print are Club hardcover editions.

*** 8 BOOKS SHOWN ON THE OTHER SIDE**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED